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SISTER LOUISE

OR

THE STORY OF A WOMAN'S REPENTANCE







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OR

THE STORY OF A WOMAN'S REPENTANCE

By ^{George John} G. J. WHYTE-MELVILLE

AUTHOR OF "DIGBY GRAND," "THE GLADIATORS," "KATERFELTO," ETC., ETC.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY MIRIAM KERNS

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Dedicated

TO

THE HON. CHARLES W. WHITE,

ETC., ETC., ETC.,

SCOTS FUSILIER GUARDS,

AS A TOKEN OF SINCERE REGARD,

BY

THE AUTHOR.

October, 1875.



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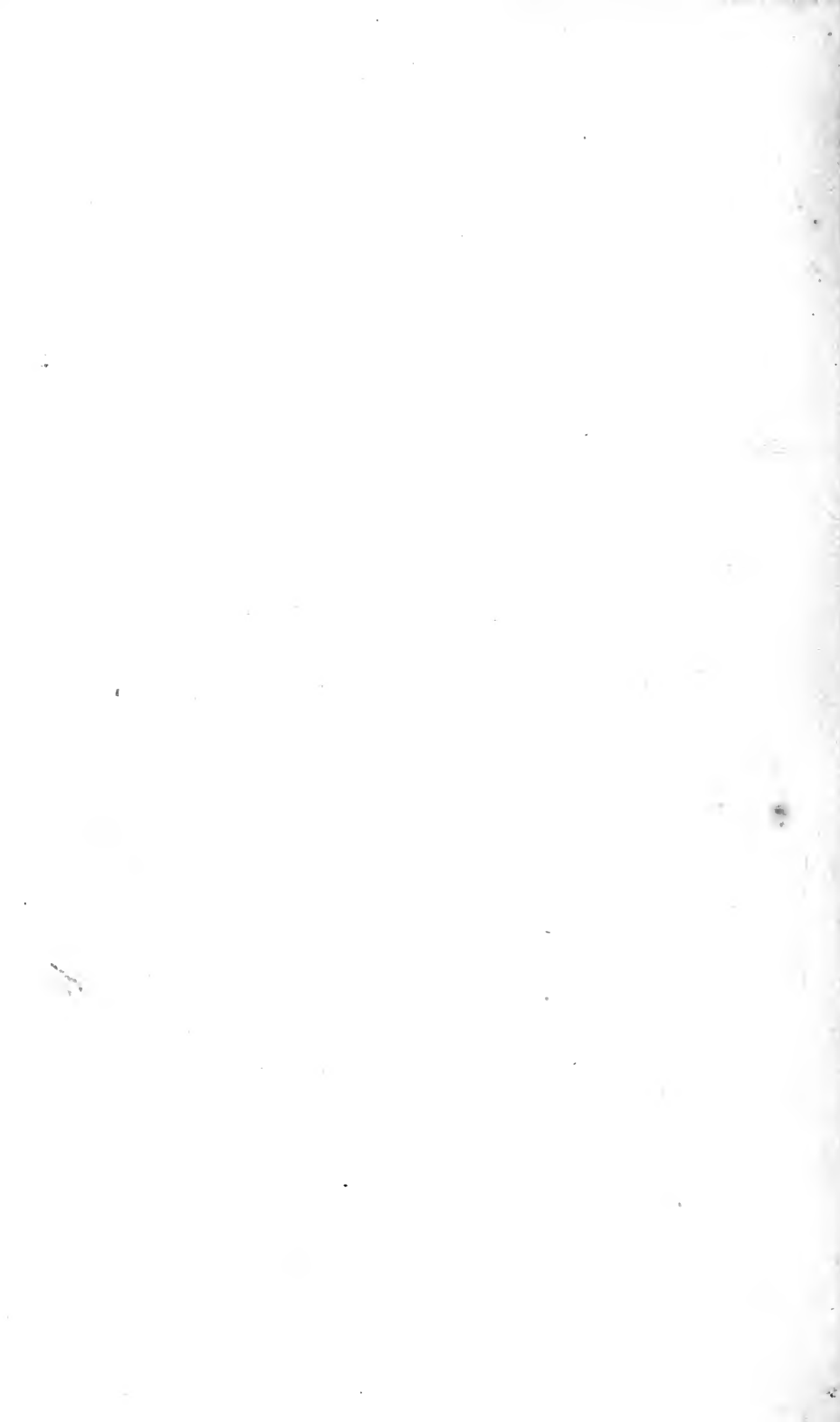
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SISTER LOUISE;

OR, THE STORY OF A WOMAN'S REPENTANCE.

BOOK THE FIRST.

MADemoisELLE DE LA VALLIÈRE.

CHAPTER I.

AN OUTPOST.

“SAUSAGE—bread—devilish little of either, and a bottle of wine, not quite full. We have eaten the Low Countries as bare as the palm of my hand, comrade, or I should be ashamed to offer such scanty rations to a guest of the Gardes Françaises.”

“The sausage is excellent,” was the reply, from a mouth already hard at work. “If you love garlic, I make you my compliment. And the wine—well, the wine is not so bad but that I wish there was more.”

The last speaker threw his plumed hat on the table, and disengaged himself of a handsome sword, richly ornamented with gold. That table was of rough deal, over which the plane had passed but lightly. Napkin or cloth it had none; its service consisting, indeed, of a coarse earthenware plate, some blunt knives, a steel fork, and a broken mug. The two young officers who bent over it seemed satisfied, nevertheless, to ply these homely implements with all the

zest and appetite engendered by soldiers' duty on campaigning fare.

They occupied a wooden hut, from which the proprietor had decamped at short notice, carrying with him the slender stock of his possessions, and leaving for entertainment of the French advanced guard little but bare boards, a free supply of water, and a roof that kept out the rain. Yet, notwithstanding its deficiencies, this supper-party of two was the result of an invitation offered the same day during a brush with the Spanish pickets, and formally accepted under a dropping fire. The host, a dark-complexioned, keen-eyed man, seemed little more than twenty. The guest, with his fair face and blooming cheeks, could scarce have reached nineteen. Their respective uniforms, though tarnished and weather-stained, were bedizened in a profusion of lace, and worn with an easy, jaunty air, as though these lively heroes could not entirely sink the man of fashion in the man of war.

The elder affected something of that abrupt tone which Frenchmen have always considered soldier-like in camp; but the voice of the younger was unusually sweet and winning, while his frank blue eyes laughed and sparkled in a light that had never yet been dimmed by tears.

Stars, collars, medals, and decorations, all these have their value in after-life,—to underrate them is to be either impracticable or insincere; but when did veteran's highest command afford him half the pleasure, half the excitement, of a boy's first campaign?

"They fell back in good order," observed the youth with a critical air, while he helped himself to sausage. "I thought at one moment they meant to draw on an engagement along the whole line."

"Lucky for you they retired," answered the other. "There was the mill on your flank, and you must have carried it. I can tell you the garden wall was loopholed, and





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the orchard held by two companies of grenadiers and a culverin. A hard nut to crack, friend Henri, even for the cadets of the King's household."

"We should have cracked it, never fear!" replied his friend, "without asking the Marquis de Bragelone and the Gardes Françaises to help us. It was cruel to be disappointed. I should have gone back to Paris a captain at least!"

"Let us drink, then, to your promotion," said the host, considerably reserving the mug for his own use, and pushing the bottle to his guest; "it cannot come too soon. I doubt if we shall have many more chances to cross swords with the Don. The Spanish infantry neither march nor fight as they did last year."

"They have not forgotten a little dancing-lesson we gave them at the Dunes," exclaimed the other, kindling. His participation in one general action had keenly stimulated that love of excitement which causes youth to court danger for its own sake rather than for the prizes it offers to successful daring. But his face fell while he added mournfully, "They have been retreating ever since, and, after all, I may have to go home undecorated even by a scratch."

"I shall like to see beautiful France once more," said De Bragelone, with a far-off look in his dark eyes; "and France will like to see us, perhaps, if she has not forgotten our existence, plunged up to our necks in these monotonous flats of marsh and mud."

"I wish those English had never joined us," observed the youth; "they bring nothing but bad luck. What can you expect of musketeers who sing psalms out of tune? They are worse than the worst of the Huguenots."

"Steady under fire," replied his more experienced comrade, "and strong-backed rogues to dig if you want an outwork thrown up. The islander is a beast, no doubt, but 'tis a serviceable beast you must allow."

"He might be, under good generals," said the youth; "but where are we to look for good generals? Turenne grows old; I saw him helped out of his saddle yesterday at head-quarters, more like a lady abbess than a marshal of France. Condé, too, so the prisoners declare, is on his last legs."

"Which will serve him to march and countermarch yet a little longer. Bah! my friend, how does all this affect you and me? The sausage is done; the bottle is empty. It is time to go my rounds; but, before I say good night, mark my words: I will wager my grey Normandy horse against your baggage pony that we shall push across the water to-morrow at daybreak only to find the enemy's fires out, his tents struck, and his rear-guard disappearing behind the flats. What is it, then, sergeant? Speak, and be quick about it."

A soldier-like figure, standing at attention in the doorway, replied, in the driest possible accents, "The report, my captain."

"Hast thou visited each post in turn?" continued his officer.

"Each post, my captain."

"Has anything unusual taken place since watch-setting?"

"Nothing *unusual*, my captain," with a stress on the adjective.

"Say, then, obstinate old pig, what is thy meaning; for meaning of some kind thou hast. Listen, Le Blanc, my sergeant has something of importance to communicate. I know it by his confounded pompous air of secrecy, and I must draw it out of him squeak by squeak, as you draw a cork out of a bottle. I wish we had one now."

With unimpaired gravity, the old soldier opened his haversack, marched into the room, deposited a fresh flask on the table, changed front as if at drill, paced back to the door,

and, facing to the right-about, stood motionless once more, awaiting further questions. Erect and rigid on the threshold of the apartment, his three-cornered hat poised over his brows, his belts crossed at an angle of scrupulous exactitude, his arms pressed close to his sides, and his keen black eyes looking straight before him, he seemed an impersonation of that military pretension and precision which was afterwards described by the greatest soldier of his nation as the coquetry of discipline.

"My captain," said he, "the enemy has withdrawn his pickets, and is already in retreat."

"You call that nothing unusual," exclaimed his officer with some impatience.

"Nothing unusual for the soldiers of Spain before the soldiers of France," was the unmoved reply. "My captain, till the moon rose, the night was as dark as a wolf's mouth. Nevertheless, I detached a corporal and a file of men, whom I led under cover of the garden wall, and so marched into the middle of the stream."

"What the devil!" broke in the other, as his informant came to a dead stop. "You didn't leave them in the water, I suppose? Have you nothing more to report?"

"Nothing unusual," repeated the imperturbable sergeant. "Keeping under shadow of the bank, and in the angle of the wall, I arrived at the enemy's outposts. No challenge, no sentry, not so much as the clink of a firelock; no, not even a whiff of tobacco on the air. 'Halt there!' said I to myself. 'Sergeant Leroux, this means a feint, a surprise, an ambuscade. Sergeant Leroux, reflect an instant, and listen with both your ears.'"

"Old dodger!" murmured his officer. "Go on, then. What next?"

"Seeing nothing, hearing nothing, knowing nothing, I crept stealthily forward, leaving one of my men two

hundred paces in rear, his comrade four, and the corporal within musket-shot of our own picket. My communications thus established, I advanced in good order on my hands and knees."

"In the name of all the devils, to find what?"

"To find nothing, my captain!—absolutely nothing. Little by little I made my ground good till I crept on to the enemy's bivouac. His fires were still burning, and the grass was trodden where the men had fallen in before they marched. I felt it with my hand; but not so much as a tobacco pipe left, not a sup of wine, nor a mouthful of soup. You may trust the Spaniard to make a clean porringer. I chanced upon a shin of beef, indeed, but it was picked to the bone."

"It is as I expected," said De Bragelone, turning to his young friend. "We may march after them till our legs ache, but we shall never see them again; and the worst service we could render King Louis would be to come up with them, and open fire. This smells of peace, as burnt cartridges smell of powder. Depend upon it, the generals on both sides have orders not to engage. Good!—I for one see no objection to a night's repose, and another draught of wine before I lie down. Old forager, where, then, didst thou find that bottle, since the bivouac of the enemy was so bare?"

The sergeant smiled, and his smile was more grim than another man's frown.

"I woke up the miller," said he; "and, in exchange for good news, I demanded of him something to drink."

"In French or in Flemish?" asked his officer, laughing. "I know thou art a man of few words."

"In both, my captain," answered the sergeant, "and yet in neither. I made myself understood thus. I pointed to my men outside, and took from the table what I required. There was no need for making phrases."

"Wilt thou taste, then?" continued De Bragelone, while he knocked the top off the bottle.

"Too much honour, my captain," replied the other. "I have a little drop here that will serve me till daybreak." He pointed to the taper neck of a flask that protruded from his haversack, and, saluting, marched himself out of the room no less stiffly than he came in.

The two young officers looked in each other's faces and laughed. For the Marquis de Bragelone, captain of the Gardes Françaises, no less than for his friend Henri de la Baume le Blanc, cadet of the King's household, this sudden retreat of an enemy with whom they hoped, day by day, to close, was a grievous disappointment, shattering at a blow those visions of military distinction in which the younger man especially delighted to indulge. But both had served that apprenticeship to rough usage and hard knocks, which teaches soldiers to value the humble luxuries of warmth, security, and repose; so, although it was disheartening to learn that all chance of an engagement must be indefinitely postponed, neither officer could deny that a bottle of good wine, a few hours of undisturbed rest, were present pleasures it would be folly to despise. To-morrow might bring its early stir in the chill morning, its harassing duties; and its toilsome march; but here was a blazing faggot, a dry resting-place, and a cup of comfort to-night. They drew in over the fire, and pledged each other with hearty good-will.

"Courage, comrade," said De Bragelone after an interval of silence, during which the thoughts of each had wandered many a league away, though his attention seemed absorbed in tasting his wine. "When all is said, war does not constitute a man's whole existence. What think you of a campaign in the fields of love? Where can one see such beautiful women as in our own beautiful France?"

"Women are all very well, under proper restrictions,"

replied the cadet, with the superb insolence of nineteen. "I have no objection to them at supper or in a ball-room; but they get sadly in the way before nightfall; and, besides, they are never at their best by daylight."

"I wonder *you* should say so," observed the Marquis. "I think you might have made better use of your eyes; unless, indeed, they have been dazzled with looking on the brightest, the fairest, the sweetest face in France."

"What do you mean?" asked the other, puzzled by his companion's earnestness. "To those who know them thoroughly, one woman is very like another. Are you thinking of anybody in particular?"

It might have been the fire-light that caused De Bragelone's cheek to flush a deeper red as he pushed the bottle to his friend. "Is your experience so varied?" said he, with a forced laugh. "Have you indeed solved a problem that occupies the wisest of us, before you are nineteen? I congratulate you on your philosophy and your hardness of heart."

Accepting in perfect good faith his friend's compliments, young Le Blanc took a strong pull at the wine-flask, and shook his head with an air of placid toleration for the follies of mankind.

"One has to pass through it, I conclude," said he, "as one has to cut one's teeth, to learn dancing, fencing, riding the great horse, and other accomplishments of a boy's education. But, after the thing is done, there's an end of it. Later in life we have other matters to take in hand. Love is all very well at sixteen."

De Bragelone looked wistfully on the fair young face, flickering in the lights and shadows of those scanty yellow flames that leaped and fell upon the hearth, to remind him forcibly, painfully, yet sweetly, of another face, the dream of his boyhood, the guiding-star of his manhood's love—a

pale face, with soft blue eyes and tender quivering mouth, delicate rather than regular of features, and, though scarred in more than one place with small-pox, so pure, so transparent, so serene, that its charm seemed rather enhanced than weakened by its very defects—a face of which the primrose was his type among flowers, the pearl among precious stones.

And this brother of hers, this careless laughing boy, who would not scruple to make a jest, if he could discover them, of his friend's most sacred feelings—who was already, by his own confession, utterly heartless and impenetrable to the softer affections—would she be like him when she reached his age? Must she not rather be kind, gentle, and womanly, as her countenance indicated, loth to be wooed, difficult to be won, yet, having at last capitulated, fond and faithful for evermore to the man she loved? Ah! would that man be the Marquis de Bragelone? Unconsciously he drew so deep a sigh as to attract his comrade's attention.

"We are absolutely growing dull!" exclaimed the latter; "silent and dull before the liquor is out! It is impossible; it is inconceivable. De Bragelone, are you sleeping on your post? Listen, comrade, I will even sing you a song to keep you awake!"

"A love-song?" sneered the Marquis, ashamed, as men usually are, of giving way for a minute to his higher feelings.

"Yes, a love-song," answered the other—"a love-song in which there is sound sense and good advice. Take my word for it, comrade, when a man has drained the liquor he cannot do better than break the glass;" and, in his rich young voice, he trolled out the following lines, accompanied by no little dramatic action addressed to his listener:—

"Ah! mademoiselle, if I were to tell
The folly and freaks of a day gone by,
The hopes that withered—the tears that fell
In a wasted life, would you laugh or cry?"

There was pleasure more than enough, and pain
To make a man wince ; but let that pass—
Nor pleasure, nor pain, shall fool me again ;
I drank the wine, and I've broken the glass !

No, monsieur, no, it is not so :
The heart may die, but it never grows old.
So long as the pulses leap and glow,
The tale of our trouble is yet to be told.
The boat swims on, if the cargo sink ;
The liquor is sweet, though we thirst no more ;
And I cannot but think, were your lip to the brink,
You would drink again, as you drank before.

With a hand so fair, the cup to prepare,
How could I, mademoiselle, decline ?
The drops are precious—the draught is rare,
But it tastes too much of the older wine.
The lesson I learned I shall never forget,
As I read it off from the looks of a lass :
'Tis folly to fret, but I smart for it yet,
And I'll drink no more—for I've broken the glass !'

There, my friend. It is hardly worth while to fill again : moreover, we have emptied the bottle. Good night, Marquis ; you have entertained me royally : but I have a good half-league to reach my quarters. And, the devil ! I have forgotten the countersign !"

"Château de Blois," answered De Bragelone. "Good night."

CHAPTER II.

CHÂTEAU DE BLOIS.

WITHIN the walls of that same Château de Blois a young girl was sleeping, who, for good and for evil, was destined to exercise no slight influence on the future of these two officers, many a league away beyond the Flemish frontier. At sixteen we cannot hazard a guess as to her dreams; but the waking hours of Louise de la Baume le Blanc de la Vallière were passed in that routine of decorous dulness which constituted the education of a young French lady in an age when performance of the most precise duties, with a rigid propriety of demeanour, was considered the only preparation for the great world and the court. Every hour brought its appointed task; every meal, simple as a hermit's, was served to an instant. The ornaments of life were protested against as dangerous, its superfluities as sinful; its simplest pleasures were tasted so sparingly as to stimulate rather than check the appetite for indulgence; and the whole course of training was so regulated as to provoke an ardent desire, the keener for repression, to launch boldly out on that forbidden ocean which appeared but the more attractive in the dangers it promised to disclose.

Whenever they were untrammelled by a heavy and intricate system of etiquette, the ladies at the court of Louis Quatorze seem to have indemnified themselves to some purpose for the restraints of their early years; but in girlhood

their society was restricted to the curé and the confessor, their liberty to the terrace and the garden wall.

Curé or confessor, no less than marshal or mousquetaire, must have been interested in a girlish figure as it passed under the bright noon of midsummer in and out an avenue of chestnuts that fringed the grey old walls of Château de Blois. The sunbeams, flickering through the broad leaves overhead, seemed to dance on her golden hair, and glisten in her soft blue eyes, while they tinged with a shade of pink, faint and delicate as the inner curve of a sea-shell, the outline of a face beautiful less in features than expression, and wearing that wistful, haunting look of which, if a man once gets them by heart, he can never forget the lessons to his dying day. Her figure was slight, well formed, and agile, though hampered by a limp, only perceptible as calling attention to her natural grace of gesture—a grace that deformity itself could hardly have impaired. In after-life, rivals declared she was lame, and denied she was beautiful; but the very vehemence of their criticism offered its best contradiction, and at one time there were few men at the court of France, from the King downwards, who would not have deemed that pale and gentle face the type of woman at her loveliest; that easy, if uneven, gait, the perfection of modest dignity and feminine self-restraint. But as yet she was little more than sixteen; and she bounded into a broad alley of sunshine like a fawn, to greet a companion of her own age, who came tripping along the castle terrace with a basket of strawberries and a slice of white bread in her hands.

“Catch, Louise!” said the new-comer, flinging some of the fruit to her friend with a saucy laugh; “there’s a double one. What a lucky chance! Wish for something, my dear—now, this instant—and thou wilt be sure to get it!”

The pale pink cheek flushed a shade deeper, while Louise replied, “What nonsense, Athénée! Dost thou really believe

these fables? And if so, why give *me* the Philippine when thou mightest want it for thyself?"

"Not I!" replied Athénée, with a toss of her proud and handsome head. "I never wanted anything yet that I did not have it; sooner or later, you understand. Everything comes in time to those who wait, but you must never tell people what it is you desire. If you do, they will keep it from you. Now, I know what *you* want, Louise, without being told."

"Impossible!" exclaimed the latter, munching her double strawberry to conceal a rising confusion that she felt was equally provoking and absurd.

"Not at all impossible," said the other; "nothing is impossible for a woman."

"We are not women yet," interposed Louise.

"I am!" was the reply—"a woman to the very ends of my fingers. I like it; but I should like better to be a man."

The listener only opened wide her blue eyes.

"A man," repeated the other. "Not a man, you understand, like Father Jacob, or that dear old curé; but a man of the world, a man of pleasure. How shall I express it? A courtier, a mousquetaire. Come, I've said it now, and it's as true as that you and I are the prettiest pair in Blois."

"But they're so wicked," protested her friend.

"I would be wicked too," said the audacious Athénée. "I would carry a sword and a laced hat, and wear—well, a justaucorps at any rate, and my stockings very smooth; for you know, Louise, I have a capital leg; and I would dance, and sup, and say such gallant things to the ladies. Oh! they have a fine time at court, and we—yes, perhaps even you and I—will have a fine time there some day as well as the others."

"Is there any chance of *my* ever being at court?" asked

Louise. "Oh! it seems too good to be true. But what makes you say so, Athénée? You *must* have a reason. Do you know anything?"

For answer the other nodded her head, and reverted to the previous question. "What would you like best in the world, Louise? That is all I ask. Have you eaten your Philippine? Good; then make up your mind: wish, and you shall have. There is no more to be said."

Now, had Louise been asked a few months, nay, even a few weeks before, what she desired most in her secret heart, she would have felt no hesitation in proclaiming her wishes aloud to the world. They were simple, innocent, and easily attained—limited, probably, to a new dress, a dance on the lawn, a bright sun for the coming *jour de fête*. Why had all these lost so much of their value now? Why did she shrink from confessing, even to herself, that she had changed so suddenly, so unadvisedly; had passed, as it were, at one step, out of girlhood into that maturity of the feelings which constitutes so much of a woman's happiness on earth—alas! so much also of her sorrow and her sin?

The answer is to be found in the great political questions of the day; in the balance of power, the interests of Europe, the destinies of France. When a mighty oak is uprooted and blown to the ground, who thinks of the poor little bird's nest crushed, and its eggs broken? When a royal alliance was formed, a great peace ratified, two empires delivered from the horrors of protracted warfare, what did it matter that one young girl, mewed up in an old provincial castle at an old provincial court, should have found, in those very rejoicings she assisted to celebrate, the fate that, after a brief space of doubtful pleasures marred by undoubted pains, consigned her for half a lifetime to expiate in a penitent's cell the weakness of a heart that, womanlike, had loved, "not wisely, but too well?"

In a burst of that fine spring weather which smiles so gaily nowhere as in the middle of France, Louis Quatorze passed through Blois to claim the hand of Maria Theresa of Austria, daughter to Philip IV. and Infanta of Spain. The young King, in all the freshness and beauty of his early manhood, seemed himself to personify that season of hope and promise in which the earth beneath, the air around, the heaven above, are all at their fairest and their best. The very flowers were not so sweet, nor the skies so serene, nor the sunshine itself so gracious, as his royal presence. Acclamations, addresses, festivities, enthusiasm, preceded, accompanied, and followed him wherever he went. To his people he was already a hero, and to the young Louise, from the first moment she set eyes on him, simply a god.

He had, perhaps, never seen, certainly not remarked, her. Too young to be presented to her sovereign in due form, she had been but one more gazer amongst a crowd of loyal subjects; and so brief was his sojourn at Château de Blois, that the very minutes during which she looked in his face might have been counted on her fingers. Yet, sleeping or waking, there was henceforth but that one face in the world for *her*. It was not an attachment, as we usually understand the term; not even a passion, a transport, an infatuation. It was rather that utter and entire devotion, totally irrespective of self, which it seems sacrilege to offer a fellow-mortal, but which Heaven cannot but forgive in consideration of the punishment that never fails to overtake it—a punishment more than adequate to the offence.

She dared not even hope to see her idol again, however much she wished it. She told herself it was unnecessary, so indelibly was his image printed on her heart; and yet, in this exalted and etherealised affection, there lurked enough of an earthly element to bid her tingle with shame at the bare suspicion that her secret could be found out.

She felt herself blushing deeper and deeper under the fixed gaze of her companion, who derived intense amusement from a confusion for which she had not the slightest pity, and of which she would herself have been quite incapable. The dark mischievous eyes shone with mirth, and the white teeth gleamed between those red lips of which she well knew the beauty, while Athénée held poor Louise by both hands, and watched her face with a mockery that was even cruel, till it faded down from crimson to pink, and from pink to pale. Then, releasing her prisoner almost rudely, she exclaimed, with marked emphasis, "You have a secret—I see it! A secret, and from *me*! Ah, Louise, how have I misplaced my confidence! Tell it at once, this instant, or I will never speak to you again!"

"I have no secrets," protested Louise, "from you, nor from any one. You asked me what I wished, and you said something about going to court. I *do* wish to go to court. Why shouldn't I? Don't *you*?"

"Don't I? Of course I do!" was the answer. "My future, my career, my predilections, all seem to lie in the great world. I shall get there, never fear, let who will forbid me. If once I set the tip of my satin shoe within the court circle, you will see, Louise, I shall never stop till I have a tabouret to sit on in presence of the princes of the blood. Ah! you may climb high if nothing has power to make you giddy or faint-hearted, and I think I was born without nerves, and, perhaps, without feelings. But the question is not of me. 'Mademoiselle de Mortemar,' says our governess, with her iciest air, 'can take good care of herself.' I am thinking of *you*. My future and yours seem so different."

They formed, indeed, a striking contrast, those two young girls, as they stood together in the shade of the chestnut-trees—the one brilliant, resolute, and self-reliant, flashing

like a ruby in the rich colouring and glitter of her beauty; the other pale, shrinking, delicate, pure, fresh, and tender as an early flower of spring.

“And what is mine to be?” asked Louise, with a smile that seemed very wistful for so young a face. “Can you tell me my fortune, Athénée, like a gipsy, by reading the palm of my hand?”

“I need only look in your face,” replied her friend. “I see it written there, plain as in a book. You were born to sacrifice yourself to others, in small things and in great. I shall drive in a carriage of my own, but you will always go with your back to the horses. It is your character, your destiny. The best thing that could happen to you would be for your mother to marry you off quick—next week—to-morrow—at once—to some good provincial of forty!—a husband who was master from the beginning. You would go to early mass, see to the children’s soup, count the plums in the orchard, and—yes—I think you would be happy in your own way. There, Louise! There’s your Philippine wished out, once for all!”

But her friend’s countenance denoted that this was by no means the kind of future she had pictured to herself, nor was its expression lost on so quick an observer as Athénée de Mortemar. “How!” she exclaimed, “are you not satisfied? Tell me, then, Louise, what is it you desire?”

“I shall never marry,” was the sober answer. “You may laugh, Athénée; but I feel I am speaking the truth. I have not your courage, your energy, your cleverness, nor your good looks. You are made for the sunshine, dear, and I am best in the shade.”

“Sunshine for ever!” laughed Athénée, inflicting, at the same time, a pinch and a caress, in return for her friend’s compliment. “I feel like a young eagle, I own.

Oh, if I had but its wings! As for staring the sun out of countenance, I can do that now!"

She turned her mocking eyes towards the sky, and in good truth their keen and searching glance looked as if it were neither to be dazzled nor deceived.

"For me, I would be content to bask in his beams," was the gentle answer. "I know well that I could never dare to meet him face to face."

Louise was thinking of her own Sun-God, the bright, the beautiful, the unattainable, who had flashed upon her for an instant, and in an instant kindled the fire that sure and slow was already smouldering at her heart.

"Courage!" exclaimed her companion. "You, too, shall have your chances, your successes, your ambition. When I rise, I will take you up with me. How could I leave you behind? Are we not friends, Louise—dear friends, always and for ever?"

"I love you, Athénée," said the other. "You know it well."

"And I love you too. Bah! that's nothing. I trust you; I confide in you. Listen, Louise; but you must be sure not to breathe a syllable, because I promised I would never mention it to a soul. We are to go to Paris, you and I, this very winter, in the household of Madame—think of that, Louise!—a young bride, married to the King's own brother. Why, every day will be a fête, and I dare say we shall have plenty of amusement even in Lent. I declare I could dance in and out through every one of these tiresome old chestnuts for joy. I hope I shall never see them again.—What's the matter? Are you ill? You look as if you were going to faint."

Good news affects people in different ways. Louise had turned as white as her gown.

"It is very hot here," she murmured. "I am choking. Athénée, let us go in."

“With all my heart,” answered Mademoiselle de Mortemar ; and the girls paced slowly back, hand in hand, along the terrace, till they disappeared within the gloomy walls of the old château, that seemed to them little better than a prison, from which they could only hope soon to be released. Each was too deeply engrossed in her own thoughts to say much to her companion : the one weaving a web of ambitious calculation for her personal advancement ; the other steeped in a dream of affection, all the sweeter and more delightful that it seemed impossible it should ever be realised.

How little could these two foresee where the hopes and wishes of each would lead, or how the coming journey was to end for both !

CHAPTER III.

FONTAINEBLEAU.

FROM Château de Blois to Fontainebleau! From light to dark; from Cinderella in the kitchen to Cinderella in the ball-room! No less complete a transformation than is undergone by the worm when it becomes a butterfly, and enough to turn an older and wiser head than that of Louise de la Vallière at seventeen.

Yet her companions remarked how pale she was, and thoughtful; how little part she took in their jokes, their sallies, their ridicule of all and everything that came under their notice, and a great deal besides. Athénée de Mortemar, who preserved, indeed, her presence of mind, and proved characteristically equal to the requirements of every occasion, and whose nature it was to lead, puzzled herself exceedingly because of her friend's abstraction, reflecting the while that nowhere could she have found a greater contrast to her own disposition than in that of her dear Louise, the sworn sister of long ago under the chestnuts at Château de Blois. If she had dared, the girl could have told herself why she was so absent and preoccupied; why she felt vaguely happy, yet unreasonably sad; why she was always longing for the time to fly quickly, yet dwelling less on the future than the past; why, though dissatisfied with and undervaluing her own beauty and advantages, she would not have changed places with any one else for the world.

The much-wished, scarce hoped-for, emancipation had

come. Mesdemoiselles de la Vallière and De Mortemar de Tonnay-Charente (to give the latter all her titles) had been appointed to the household of "Madame"—that English Princess Henriette, so lately married to the Duke of Orleans, who was invariably designated "Monsieur," in his right of rank as next brother to the King of France.

Shoulders might be shrugged, and eyebrows elevated, while idle tongues told each other that the attractions of his sister-in-law accounted for his Majesty's constant attendance at her mimic court. It mattered little to Louise. Enough for her that she saw him every day. While in his presence she was silent, oppressed, covered with confusion, and longing for her ordeal to be over, only that she might begin counting the moments till she could see him again. She had never yet so much as exchanged words, perhaps not even looks, with her sovereign, and already in her secret heart she loved him better than her own soul.

Though it had hitherto escaped the monarch's notice, other eyes had coveted, other hands been stretched, to pluck this sweet and shrinking flower. Foremost among these admirers was the Count de Guiches, who proclaimed himself in all societies fatally stricken by the loveliness of Made-moiselle de la Vallière, and urged his suit with a vehemence the girl dared not resent, lest the dislike she tried to conceal should be attributed to its real motive—an attachment to some one else.

Athénée took her to task daily for her coldness. "At least, my dear," she would urge, "you might give the man a look sometimes, or a smile, in exchange for bouquets and bonbonnières, to say nothing of sighs and groans, and all sorts of tragic starts and frowns, if you speak two syllables to your brother, or Bragelone, or anybody else. It commits you to nothing. Remember, Louise, no chain is so strong but, if you pull it hard enough, it will break."

And Louise would reply, "Oh, Athénée, if you did but know how tired I am of it all! Can they not suffer me to go my own way in peace, and let me alone?"

Then Mademoiselle de Mortemar opened her fine eyes wide, and nodded her head, and pondered, and perhaps found a clue to the mystery that was yet a secret, even for those whom it most concerned. So the days went by, each with some new gaiety, some fresh distraction to satisfy that appetite for amusement and variety, the morbid indulgence of which was hereafter to bring starvation on his subjects, and make bankrupt the most powerful monarch in Europe. It was at one of these brilliant gatherings of royalty, rank, wit, and beauty that a few words, lightly spoken and overheard by the merest accident, decided for ever the fate of Louise de la Vallière.

A lofty hall ornamented to the roof with a hundred mythical devices of Cupids and Hebes, opening on a moonlit terrace overhung with stately trees; a floor of inlaid wood rubbed and polished till it shone like glass; a profusion of wax lights shedding their lustre on a crowd of sumptuously dressed courtiers, shifting and mingling in all the gaudy combinations of a kaleidoscope; music pealing from the galleries; salvers and flagons glittering on the sideboards; beautiful women, more or less painted, laughing, languishing, making eyes and small talk; handsome men, each with a year's income on his back in velvet, laces, and brocade, doing his best or worst to be agreeable; and over all the decorous hush of royalty, repressing license while it encouraged gaiety, and toning down the whole to the best manners of the politest society in Christendom.

"'Tis you! I never doubted it!" exclaimed Henri le Blanc, warmly embracing a young officer in royal uniform covered with gold lace. "What a contrast, Marquis, to where we parted a year ago!"

“And we have never met since,” replied De Bragelone. “Truly, my dear Henri, I cannot regret a peace that brings us back to such scenes as these. All our dreams of glory, were they worth one *coup d’œil* of the court at Fontainebleau?”

“Better than an outlying picket in Flanders, I admit. And yet, Marquis, we were tranquilly happy, too, with the advanced guard of the army. Nothing to disturb or annoy one, and just enough distraction to keep a man from going to sleep.”

“Don Juan and Condé took care of that. But seriously, Henri, can you find yourself regretting the cursed *réveillée*, the cold wet mornings in the mud, long marches, short rations, hard work, and hard fare?”

“There are times when I wish myself even on outpost duty in a Flemish meadow. Listen to those violins, Marquis. Ours used to play a merrier air when we opened the trenches to their music, and I believe, in fact, there was less real danger there than here.”

“Still a philosopher, Henri, I perceive—a philosopher *en mousquetaire*; the first I have ever seen. Stand a little farther off, that I may take you in at a glance. Look! There is a young lady passing, to whom I have been presented to-night. I should like to show her a mousquetaire who boasts that he is not to be taken alive. What! you know her, then? Henri! Henri! I would wager you have mended that glass of yours, and are ready to break it again!”

While he spoke, Mademoiselle de Mortemar passed so close, that the skirts of her dress touched young Le Blanc as she went by. Though he saluted politely, there was enough constraint and awkwardness in his bow to afford his old comrade a share in a secret he would gladly have kept to himself.

Athénée, looking very handsome and self-possessed, seemed

well aware of her conquest, and accepted it, according to her custom, with a mixture of condescension and amusement. It gratified her to be admired, even to be loved; but she insisted very positively that the devotion should be all on the other side.

"You take everything, and give nothing," said one of her suitors in a moment of bitter anger and disappointment.

"It is thus that people become rich," was the mocking answer.

"Your head will always take care of your heart," he continued, seizing his hat to go.

"I must trust the strong to protect the weak," she replied; and he sat down again, more in love with her than ever.

"Have you seen Louise, Monsieur le Marquis?" asked Henri, turning the tables on his friend in perfect unconsciousness; for no man ever seems to realise that another man can be attracted by his sister. "She must be here with the others; but I cannot find her, though I have searched this room and the next. That poor Louise! she is so shy, so retiring! She is quite capable of running off to hide wherever there is fresh air and solitude. I shall go and look for her on the terrace."

Here, under the same roof, in the midst of a crowd where he might come face to face with her at any moment! The whole pleasure of the evening was at an end for the Marquis de Bragelone. But lately arrived in Paris, he had not yet made himself acquainted with the gossip of the capital and the court. He had no idea that the girl he loved was as sure to be in attendance on her royal mistress, here at Fontainebleau, as any one of the Cupids and Psyches that adorned the walls and ceilings. When he did realise it, the placid sensation of amusement, in which only a man enjoys what are called the pleasures of society,

gave place to a condition of anxiety and excitement very nearly akin to pain.

His heart beat; the blood rushed to his head. He would see her again! He would see her again! To this engrossing thought every other consideration—the forms of politeness, the duties of ceremony, the very exigencies of etiquette—must give place.

He *did* see her again, and thus. Hunting through the crowd, as Athénée observed, “like a dog that had lost its master,” he came all at once upon the well-known figure, the fair, gentle face, fairer and more gentle than it had looked in his very dreams. She was listening impatiently to the expostulations of an exceedingly handsome man, dressed with a splendour that seemed unrivalled even in that splendid crowd, and wearing coxcomb written on every inch of his fine person, from the dark arch of his eyebrows to the red heels of his shoes, who had apparently no scruple in making the whole society confidants of the cause he was pleading, so loud were his tones, so forcible his gestures, so entirely without reserve the adoration he expressed in looks and words.

“But, mademoiselle,” De Bragelone heard him protest, “you cannot deny my constancy, my good faith, my entire devotion to yourself. There *must* be a reason for this insensibility—this coldness. It is unheard of—inconceivable. I have a rival, mademoiselle. I insist on knowing who he is: I have a right to demand so much!”

“A rival implies equality, Monsieur le Comte,” was the chilling answer. “You rate yourself a little too high, and you flatter me more than I deserve. Shall I say, more than I desire? Good evening, monsieur; I must return to my duties with Madame. Ah, Monsieur de Bragelone, you are welcome indeed! And I have not seen you for so long!”

How pleased he was at the warmth of her greeting ! How little heed he took of the scowl with which Count de Guiches measured him from head to foot ! How lovingly he looked into the blue eyes that so frankly met his own ! This, indeed, made amends for absence, uncertainty, hope deferred, all the pains and penalties of his malady ; and, for the space of some two minutes, who so happy as the Marquis de Bragelone ?

Our young officer understood his profession thoroughly—had a quick eye for the breach in an earthwork, the weak point of a position, was not to be led into an ambuscade, or deceived by the feint of an enemy ; but he knew no more of a woman's subtleties and a woman's heart than his grey Normandy horse—the creature that, next to Louise de la Vallière, he loved best in the world.

She took his arm, and bade him conduct her into the ante-room, where she found her friend Athénée, and left him with a courteous salute, in which there was more politeness than affection. As they traversed the crowd, bowing right and left to their acquaintance, he found courage to say nothing more compromising than that “the night was warm,” and “the entertainment of unusual brilliancy.” Ere he could make up his mind to ask whether she had quite forgotten him, they arrived at the circle of ladies in waiting, and it was too late. Smothering a curse that savoured more of the camp than the court, De Bragelone accepted his dismissal with all the composure he could muster, reflecting angrily how much better use he could make of the occasion if it would present itself again.

In such a mood a man is ready to meet half-way any one who wishes to fix a quarrel on him, with reason or without. The Count de Guiches, in the worst of humours, had taken serious offence at the mere presence of this rival, who seemed to have dropped from the clouds for his discom-

future, and resolved to offer him an affront at the very first opportunity. It was not long before he found an excuse for an altercation that in those days could not but terminate by an appeal to the sword. Hovering near his enemy, he purposely placed his foot in such a position that De Bragelone must inadvertently touch it as he retired a few paces, to avoid turning his back on Monsieur, who was scattering compliments amongst the crowd with royal condescension. To the polite excuses of the Marquis, De Guiches listened with an insolent smile. When the other had finished, he replied in dry and measured accents, "Enough said, monsieur: practice makes perfect. An officer of the Gardes Françaises ought to be more skilful in retreat!"

De Bragelone's eyes blazed with anger. "How, monsieur?" he demanded. "What does that mean? I have the honour to be a colonel—do you understand, monsieur?—in the distinguished corps you mention, of which, you see, I wear the uniform. Monsieur desires to insult me, of course!"

"Of course!" repeated the other, far more politely now that he had attained his object. "The Marquis de Bragelone is an adversary of whom any man might be proud."

"For to-morrow, then."

"For to-morrow, with two witnesses. I have the honour to wish Monsieur le Marquis good evening."

"Good evening, Monsieur le Comte. Hold! What does this mean? Hands off, monsieur! I do not understand these jokes!"

A third person was standing between them with a grasp of iron on the wrist of each, that they attempted in vain to shake off, while the new-comer, a tall, soldier-like man, armed, belted, and equipped as for parade, looked from one to the other with a frown that covered, nevertheless, a grim smile of amusement and approval.

"It is a joke of which I will explain the meaning, gentlemen, in the guard-room," said this functionary. "He laughs loudest who laughs last; and I must do *my* duty, though you have forgotten *yours*."

"Nonsense, Brissac!" interposed the Count. "You are mistaken, my good friend. Permit me to present to you the Marquis de Bragelone, an officer of distinction. We have no such intention as you suppose."

Brissac looked doubtfully in each of the young faces, still heated from the altercation he had overheard.

"What do you imagine I am here for?" said he. "Why do you think I parade the household troops daily as if before an enemy, but to watch over the safety of the court, and obey the orders of the King? He forbids you to fight; I forbid you to fight. He forbids you to quarrel; I forbid you to quarrel. Will you come quietly, or must I make a commotion and send for a file of the guard?"

De Bragelone turned pale; even the Count seemed uneasy.

"It will be my ruin," said the latter. "For the love of heaven, Brissac, have a little patience. It was no more than an argument,—a trifle,—scarcely a difference of opinion. The Marquis and I are perfectly agreed now; are we not, Marquis?"

The old officer, himself a professed duellist, was beginning to relent.

"I know you both," said he, "better than you think. You have given your proofs, though you are but boys. Pledge me your word of honour, each of you, that this affair goes no further to-night, to-morrow, nor at any future time."

The young men looked blankly in his face. Neither liked to be first to speak, though the promise was on the lips of both. But at this juncture a hum of voices, under

cover of which the preceding conversation had been carried on, ludicrously enough, in whispers, was succeeded by a profound silence, broken after a short interval by a general murmur, calling on the company to "Stand aside, messieurs and mesdames! Make room—make room! The King! the King!"

CHAPTER IV.

BETRAYED.

HE could not have looked more royal had he been ten times a king: he would have excited no less attention had he been the humblest of the subjects gathered there to do him honour. Not another man in the whole round of courtiers and nobility enjoyed such personal advantages as the lord and ruler of them all.

It was scarcely his fault that he should greedily accept an adulation he could not but believe sincere every time he looked in the glass. Personal flattery could hardly be too direct for one whose personal beauty so far exceeded the average of humanity; and in a court like his, amongst a people like the French, it is not too much to say that the homage he received during his early manhood was such as the Romans offered to an emperor when they proclaimed him a god.

Louis Quatorze was at this time about three-and-twenty years of age—a man of moderate stature, moulded in a due proportion of form, promising muscular strength and activity, no less than the soundness of constitution necessary to mental energy, and which it so often accompanies. In effect, he was an excellent horseman, fencer, and dancer, priding himself especially on his grace and dignity in the last-named exercise, while his robust health seemed to ignore alike cold and heat, hunger and thirst, fatigue of body, and wear and tear of brain. Nor was he tolerant

of such weaknesses in other constitutions as seemed unable to influence his own. Few contrarieties, small or great, irritated the King more than to hear his courtiers complain of bad weather, long fasts, want of sleep, or any of those petty discomforts that, for average humanity, make half the troubles of life.

His face was one on which men could not look without approval, women without admiration and delight. His grave blue eyes, regular features, and flowing locks of dark chestnut hair combined, indeed, to form no common type of manly beauty ; but there was in his countenance something far beyond the mere comeliness of a handsome youth, something of gracious dignity and self-possession, not entirely without a latent gravity, majestic rather than severe, that seemed to command obedience from those with whom he came in contact. In the daily round of life—and his waking hours, it must be remembered, were passed almost entirely in public—he never appeared ridiculous ; and it was notorious that none, even the most favoured of his courtiers, could venture to take a liberty with the King.

Both De Bragelone and the Count felt overawed more than they would have liked to confess by the presence of their sovereign. Bowing right and left with an easy grace peculiar to himself, he reached the spot where they were standing as the former said, "It must be for another time, then ?" and the latter replied, "With the greatest pleasure," like men who were arranging a party for supper or the chase ; but the King's ear was quick to detect the inflection of a tone, his eye to catch the turn of a gesture ; nothing escaped his observation, and his curiosity was insatiable. Each young nobleman, while he bowed profoundly to his sovereign, felt the blood mounting to his temples more freely than was necessitated by the humility of his salute.

Brissac also recognised the situation, and laughed in his sleeve. "I have not finished with them yet," he thought, standing erect and rigid behind his master. "'Tis a pity, too; they are pretty swordsmen, both; and it would be as fair a match as one is likely to see in these days, when everybody but me seems condemned to dance—dance—dance; nothing but dance!"

There was no little truth in the veteran's sarcasm.

For several consecutive hours "brawls" and "courantos" had been performed in the great hall, and now the whole company must move to the borders of the lake below the terrace, where a theatre was erected for the performance of a dramatic dance, representing the progress of the seasons, in which the King himself enacted the principal figure of Spring.

The walls of this building were brilliantly illuminated, and it had been left open at the roof. The summer sky was gemmed with stars; the lake reflected countless candles on its glittering surface. Above, below, around, all seemed a sheet of light; and, while Lulli with his violins played the most seductive of symphonies, beautiful figures, clad in shining raiment, passed to and fro before the dazzled eyes of the spectators, like beings from another world.

It was not flattery, it was not prejudice, it was but justice to admit that the King outshone his companions, not only in dress and bearing, but in that personal beauty which owed nothing to the adventitious aids of royalty, in that nameless grace which is not necessarily the accompaniment of rank.

One pair of eyes, even more beautiful than his own, never ceased to watch him from the moment he entered, bringing with him light and life and happiness, till he retired, and all seemed dark. One gentle heart was beating rapturously in its longing to go out and cast itself down, to be trodden

under those beloved feet—to prove itself, in however wild a sacrifice, his, and his only, to take or to leave, to honour or to despise, once for all, now and for evermore.

Louise de la Vallière, hiding behind a row of applauding spectators, gave herself up to a dream of illusive and intoxicating happiness, from which, alas! she had no power to wake till it was too late.

Like a woman in a dream, too, when the dance was over, she groped her way out into the fresh air, instinctively seeking the society of her friend Athénée, who, totally uninfluenced by romantic associations, was good enough to express a qualified approval of the actors and their performance.

“The costumes were in character,” she observed, “but the ladies’ dresses much too short, and the minuet should have been left out. Figure to yourself a goddess performing a *pas seul* to one of Lulli’s fantasias on the violin! Enough to make one die with laughing, had it not been danced in such good time.”

“I thought it beautiful, and it did not make me laugh,” answered Louise, more to herself than her companion, with a low sigh, faint and gentle as the night breeze that whispered in the neighbouring wood.

Hand in hand the two girls stole across the grass till they reached its outskirts, where they placed themselves on a fallen tree to enjoy the fresh night air, taking care, we may be sure, not to crease their dresses as they sat down.

There was no moon: but for the stars, it would have been pitch dark. The leaves stirred softly overhead. A night-ingale trilled and murmured in the adjoining copse. From Lulli’s violins within rose and fell a sad sweet strain, that died away on the outward air in tones of exquisite melody. It was a time and place for the imparting of secrets, the

indulgence of romance, the interchange of confidence, and they thought they were alone.

So they would have been but for the King's quickness of perception and jealousy of authority over the actions, even the thoughts, of those who formed his court. Louis had detected in the manner of Messieurs de Bragelone and De Guiches something that argued bad blood, and, observing them separate themselves from the crowd, so soon as the dance was finished in which he had taken a leading part, his Majesty threw a cloak over his costume, called on Brissac to attend him, and followed close behind these two fiery spirits, determined that, whatever might be the result of their altercation, he would teach them who was master here, even if he had to vindicate his authority by sending them both to the Bastille.

"We have made a narrow escape, monsieur," said De Guiches, turning short round on the Marquis, when they had traversed some forty paces of noiseless turf, unconscious that they were closely watched by their sovereign and his satellite; "that old Brissac does not understand trifling, and we must have passed our word of honour but for the timely arrival of the King."

"It would have been a grave disappointment," answered the other. "His Majesty is always welcome, but he could not have appeared at a more fortunate moment."

"We are scarcely safe yet, I fear," resumed the Count. "Brissac is quite capable of having both of us arrested to-morrow at guard-mounting, simply on suspicion. It might be months before we could arrange this little affair. Monsieur de Bragelone, may I venture to ask of you an extraordinary favour?"

"Monsieur de Guiches has only to name it. Possibly he does but anticipate the request I was about to make."

"Monsieur is infinitely obliging. Brave men understand

each other without explanation. The absence of witnesses seems the only difficulty."

"With persons of honour like the Count de Guiches such precautions are unnecessary."

"And monsieur finds it quite practicable to fence in the dark?"

"It is enough for me to feel my adversary's blade, till the time comes for him to feel mine."

"On guard, then, Monsieur le Marquis!"

"On guard, Monsieur le Comte!"

In another second swords would have been crossed, but a cloaked figure stepped resolutely between them, and their points sank as if their arms were paralyzed with the first tones of the King's voice, scarcely raised above a whisper, but very grave, very authoritative, very severe.

"How, gentlemen?" said Louis. "Are you at my court—*mine*—the guests of your sovereign; or is this a brawl in a wine-shop of the Faubourg? Speak, then! Have you any excuse to offer? Come, Brissac, do your duty."

De Bragelone stood speechless, stupefied, at his wits' end; but De Guiches, who better understood the temper of his sovereign, broke his sword in two, and, falling on his knees, placed the fragments at the King's feet.

"I could never draw it again, sire," said he, "but to plunge it in my own heart, if I have been so unfortunate as to offend your Majesty."

Louis dearly loved power. Unqualified submission was the readiest way to his good graces. "And you, sir?" he asked, turning sharply round on De Bragelone.

"It was no quarrel of my own, sire," humbly pleaded the Marquis. "I bared steel on behalf of my corps—the Gardes Françaises."

Louis was mollified. It gratified his peculiar weakness to observe how these gallant gentlemen, who had faced death a

hundred times before the enemies of France, were unmanned by his displeasure.

"Explain to the Marquis," said he, turning to Brissac, "that if this had happened at the Tuileries, he would not have escaped so easily. For you, Monsieur le Comte, take care you do not offend again—in *any* particular! You may cross the King's path once too often. Follow me, gentlemen. Stay! Hush! What have we here? Yes; your punishment shall be to learn your characters from the lips of those two young ladies in the dark yonder. I heard both your names mentioned even now."

While he spoke, the King drew them aside, behind the fallen tree on which Louise and Athénée had seated themselves, and listened with no little amusement to the girls' conversation, which turned, indeed, on the late scene of revelry, and the merits of different gentlemen at court.

"De Bragelone, then?" said Athénée, obviously in answer to her friend. "What do you think of him, since De Guiches is an object of such detestation? How did you describe the Count, dear? A peacock for vanity, and an ape for grimace, was it not?"

The King could not resist touching the elbow of his offending courtier, enjoying with a schoolboy's glee the discomfiture and annoyance of De Guiches.

"Bragelone is well enough," was the answer in Louise's gentle tones. "To speak truth, dear, I scarcely observed him. I don't think I could even tell you the colour of his coat."

It was a hot summer's night, but the Marquis felt an icy chill creeping about his heart.

"You are very provoking, Louise," continued Athénée; "I am out of patience with you. What do you expect? What are you waiting for? Is nobody handsome enough—good enough—great enough? We shall hear you say, next, that you do not admire the King?"





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"Since you mention the King," answered the other, with a little tremble in her voice, "I must admit that I cannot comprehend how people ever look at any one else when he comes into the room."

Athénée burst into a laugh. "Nothing will serve you but royalty, then!" she exclaimed. "Mademoiselle, I make you my compliments. Well done for a country education! I had no idea we aspired so high as to aim at a king."

"You do not understand me, Athénée," said the other earnestly, but in a low, tender voice. "It is precisely because he *is* a king that one need not be afraid of him. The man gains nothing—absolutely nothing—from the monarch. Were he only a subject, he would be far too dangerous, and—and—far too dear!"

"We have heard enough," whispered Louis, moving stealthily away. "Gentlemen, we are men of honour: for to-night, the past is the past; its occurrences shall never be reverted to again by you or by me. Come, Brissac. Gentlemen, I wish you good evening."

CHAPTER V.

CONFIRMED.

EVEN a king rises early when he means to take his pleasure in the royal amusement of stag-hunting; but those must indeed be astir betimes whose duty it is to make preparation for his Majesty's sport. Long before sunrise, Monsieur le Grand, in a state of considerable hurry and irritation, was already moving about his chamber, booted and spurred, with a cup of coffee in his hand. A valet was fitting in its belt the hunting sword his master intended to wear; and a groom, smelling strong of stables, stood obsequiously at the door. The Grand Écuyer—called, from his office, "Monsieur le Grand"—had his hands full. With him originated the arrangements that mounted the whole court. By his orders the King's own horse was saddled, and without his consent the wheels of those coaches would have refused to turn that took about the maids of honour, six or seven at a time. His responsibilities, he used to say, were of so grave a nature as to have turned his hair white. He was answerable for the speed, soundness, docility, and good-humour of several scores of horses, whose equine pranks and shortcomings were all laid to his charge. From the Pope's legate to the youngest maid of honour clutching at her pommel in unaccustomed terror, the personal safety—worse, the personal misgivings—of every equestrian belonging to the court became referable to Monsieur le Grand. "Not an ear is pricked," he would observe, "nor

a heel lifted, but they remember me (for evil) in their prayers."

"And our demoiselles?" asked the groom respectfully. "How many horses does Monsieur le Grand desire for our demoiselles?"

Putting down his coffee, the perplexed nobleman began counting them on his fingers.

"Peste!" he exclaimed, "these young ladies give me more trouble than would a whole division of cavalry. I wish to heaven they were all married, with a dozen children apiece! Let us see, now. Mademoiselle de Montalais, the tall chestnut, stall No. 73; Mademoiselle de Pons, the little grey barb that came from the Tuileries; Mademoiselle de Mortemar—ah! she is beautiful, that girl, as a summer's morning, and it does one good to see her ride! She shall have Charlemagne. I meant him for Monsieur Fouquet, but the horse has not been out for a week, and we cannot yet afford to sacrifice our Minister of Finance. He shall ride the old Normandy grey; and Mademoiselle de l'Aubepine the brown mare in the same stable. That is all, I think."

"Pardon, Monsieur le Grand, there is still Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

"I cannot mount any more of them, and I won't!" was the answer, in a tone of exasperation. "She is the youngest, and the last comer; besides, she looks pale, and could never support the fatigue under a burning sun. She shall go in one of the coaches. Quick! be off and see to it. Everything must be ready in a short half-hour from the present moment;" and the Master of the Horse, drawing on his gloves, strode forth to consult with the Grand Piqueur, or chief huntsman, followed by a valet bearing hat, whip, bugle-horn, waist-belt, and some score of appliances for the chase.

Even in youth Louis Quatorze affected that rigid punctuality and minute subdivision of time, which amounted to a monomania in his after-years. Half an hour had elapsed to a second, when Monsieur le Grand, running his eye over five or six coaches and some fifty horses in waiting, saddled and bridled, at the palace gate, pronounced his arrangements complete. Ten seconds later, the Guards were clattering their arms, and his own hat swept the ground in acknowledgment of a grave "Good morning" from the King, who, mounting without further ceremony, rode off at a gallop. Horns sounded, horses pawed, Brissac dismissed his guard, the coaches moved to the door, ladies gathered up their reins, gentlemen adjusted themselves in the saddle, and the whole cavalcade, in considerable confusion, not entirely without alarm, moved off towards the forest, on the track of their sovereign. The rendezvous was at no great distance, under a fine old oak standing where four alleys met. Here were assembled the piqueurs and other assistants of the chase. A score of black-and-tan hounds lay licking their lips at the chief huntsman's feet, while now and again some sagacious veteran would rise, stretch his ponderous frame, and snuff the air with a peculiar quivering of the nostril, that denoted how sensitive was the organ by which he hunted his prey. None of the hounds were yet uncoupled, nor, indeed, was one-half the pack actually present; for relays had been stationed in different glades of the forest, where the deer was likely to pass, that they might run him down surely at last, as his powers began to fail, and their own pursuit would gather fresh strength in proportion to his fatigue.

Meanwhile, the lordly beast, with broad, well-fed back and noble width of beam, slept securely in a leafy thicket, not half a league distant from the rendezvous, to be roused ere the sun was high by a deep melodious roar, that instinct

rather than experience warned him was the challenge of his enemy. With a bound of mingled fear and defiance he darted from his covert, to stand for some few seconds in an open space between the trees, clothed with strength and beauty—majestic, motionless, and at gaze; eager eye and listening ear strained to the utmost tension; his very mouth shut tight, that his spreading nostrils might catch the merest taint of danger floating on the breeze. A royal quarry indeed, delighting the heart of the King's huntsman, who, appraising him with critical eye, noted the sixteen tines on his antlers and the three inches of fat on his ribs.

"Tantara ! tantara ! holà !" shouted the piqueurs.

"Gently, gentlemen ! For love of all the saints, gently !" protested the huntsman.

"Forward ! forward !" exclaimed the King.

A score of horns awoke the echoes in reverberating blasts somewhat out of tune. The hounds, liberated from their couples, laid themselves, with an eager outburst, on the line. The cavalcade advanced at a canter, the coaches lumbered into motion at a trot, and Monsieur le Grand ambled about in rear of the whole, grave and preoccupied, with the air of one who works a complicated machine by pulling dexterously at the strings. Louis himself, well mounted and an accomplished rider, pressed forward with the hounds, cheering his favourites by name, and remarking on their merits to his equerry in waiting, who kept scrupulously half a horse's length behind his sovereign, while the head piqueur followed at a respectful distance.

His Majesty invariably outrode his whole court; sometimes, indeed, fairly enough by superior speed and skill, sometimes by favour of a delicate flattery, that even in the excitement of a gallop submitted to precedence of rank. It was a subtle compliment, and gratified the King even more than the open adulation to which he was equally

accustomed. On the present occasion, however, under a burning sun, and through the depths of a leafy forest that admitted hardly a breath of air, there was little temptation to compete with the unflagging monarch. His own energy and the speed of his horse soon distanced all followers, but those whose immediate duty it was to keep him in sight; and if it was possible for Louis ever to put off his self-consciousness and forget he was King of France, those stirring, swiftly-passing minutes during which he sped down the green woodland alleys, cheering on his hounds like any obscure lord of Provence or Touraine, were probably amongst the happiest of his life.

But our business is not with the monarch and his handsome white horse, stained slate-colour in sweat; nor with the weary hounds, rolling and labouring on the line with a solemn deliberation that yard by yard increased the distance from their prey; nor with the relays in every corner, yelling and struggling to wrench themselves out of the attendants' hands, holding these fresh hounds back, ready to slip them at a sign from their busy chief, the Grand Piqueur, who, gesticulating like a madman, voluble, eager, excited, swore strange oaths, and perspired freely in his livery of green and gold; nor even with the noble stag himself, athirst and panting, swift of foot, and full of mettle still, but dimly conscious, in the mental forecast we call instinct, that there was safety only among the green recesses of his native woods, that he must wind and circle, haunted still by that ceaseless monotonous death-knell, back to the pool beneath the alders, where he slaked his thirst but yesterday at sunset, while he yet reigned in peace and security, lord of the forest and the glade.

Let us return through an advancing throng of courtiers, who are enjoying, or pretending to enjoy, the excitement of the chase. They come on in long-drawn file, at every pace,

from the free gallop of Charlemagne reined by Athénée de Mortemar with her accustomed grace and daring, to the high, bone-setting trot of De Bragelone's grey Normandy horse, hitherto esteemed a charger of considerable pretension, but failing notably to-day, under the unusual heat of the weather and the exigencies of a pace which his campaigning experiences have never taught him to sustain.

De Bragelone is, perhaps, the less disgusted with his favourite, that an unassuming position in rear of the whole party enables him to ride at the coach-window, from which looks out the sweet pale face of Louise de la Vallière. Thus he catches, at long and furtive intervals, an unauthorised glimpse of happiness from the blue eyes he loves so well.

The summer sun pours down with tropical heat. He is blinded in the glare, choked with dust, hampered by all the trappings and paraphernalia of a state dress. There are five maids of honour in the carriage, besides the young lady to whom he is attached; so that were she ever so well disposed to encourage him, she cannot but be conscious that ten sharp eyes are watching her every glance, and Louise herself wishes to afford him no more favour than is due to the early friend of childhood; yet, in spite of these drawbacks, De Bragelone believes that he is happy.

Those who knew him best would have been the most surprised to see him ride so contentedly in rear of all the courtiers. It inferred some great attraction that he could thus be tempted to occupy a position so unusual in a pastime of which he was an ardent and successful follower.

"Mademoiselle," said the Marquis between the bumps of his great Normandy horse, "you have done well to choose the carriage instead of the saddle on such a suffocating day. It is my loss, but I am not selfish enough to regret it."

"I am," replied Louise, whose thoughts travelled half a league in front, where the King's dark chestnut locks were

streaming behind him as the beautiful white horse bore his rider swiftly through the air. "I would give anything to be mounted like the others. Suffocating, say you? It is more than suffocating here, inside the coach, I give you my word."

How easy to wish what we believe! De Bragelone never doubted but that her discontent arose from a desire to be galloping freely at his side.

"And you," continued Louise, "you are more than usually attentive to the ladies. We are proud of our cavalier, no doubt, but I have explained to these demoiselles that you do not ordinarily ride so far behind the hounds when the game is on foot."

"There are two ends to every hunt," answered De Bragelone, "and this end is the one I prefer to-day."

There was much truth in his remark. According to a man's courage, skill, and the capacities of his steed, does he make choice at which extremity of the chase he prefers to attend; but the Marquis had not taken into consideration that, in a woodland run with a stag, both ends, as on the present occasion, are sometimes known to meet. He had scarcely spoken ere the deer bounded into the alley under his horse's very nose, eliciting from that animal a start that somewhat inconvenienced its rider, and from the occupants of the coach shrill exclamations of delight and surprise.

"See, then! what horns! what beauty! what agility!" exclaimed one. "Our Lady protect us! the next bound would have landed him in the carriage," screamed another, while De Bragelone told himself that Louise had never seemed so lovable as when she murmured, "Poor beast, how I pity it! How exhausted it looks—how hopeless! I saw its eyes. It cannot run half a league farther. See, it is ready to drop! Oh, how cruel! The hounds will tear it, and it will die!"

In good truth, a large proportion of the pack, laid on judiciously within the last half-hour, were already on the very haunches of the deer. Even while the girl was speaking, broke on her ear a death-note that those who have once heard it can never mistake—the outcry raised by his pursuers when they clamour round the stag at bay. Leaping a ditch into the alley, Louis drew the white horse's rein, and stood by the coach for an instant, listening motionless, like the statue of a god.

During that instant he recognised the same tones that had so excited his fancy in the dark of midnight at Fontainebleau. The next, Louise's gentle face turned crimson with confusion, and the King, forgetting alike baying hounds and dying stag, all the events and accessories of the royal chase, was stooping uncovered at the carriage window, while De Bragelone, reining back, gnawed his lip to stifle that prescience of evil which comes over a man like a cloud when he little looks for it, but, unlike a cloud, never passes away till the threatened storm has broken.

"Mademoiselle is pitiful," said the King, whose plumes were fluttering round his stirrup-iron. "Not always do those who have so much power show so much mercy. If mademoiselle desires it, I will give orders for the stag to be saved."

She found courage for one glance at the grave blue eyes, the sweet and dangerous smile, ere she faltered out, "Ah, sire! it becomes you to show mercy, for who so powerful as yourself?"

"As man or monarch?" asked Louis, with a quick glance of meaning that deepened the flush on her brow.

"Nay, sire," she replied in an agitation that added fresh charms to her beauty, "you could not help being a king if there were no other kings left in the world."

Such an answer might have been made by any of his

courtiers. He scarcely heeded its purport. No; it was the tone that enslaved him—the same sweet voice that had confessed its admiration for himself, under cover of darkness, in confidence to its familiar friend; and behold! here was a face to match the voice—a face more winning in its very defects than that of the most admired beauty who adorned his court. Even his royal self-possession gave way. He murmured some commonplace remark on the inconvenience of hunting in a carriage, regretting she should be incommoded by the roughness of the alleys, and inquiring “if mademoiselle did not love to ride.”

“I love it, sire,” she answered; “but I am timid, foolishly timid; and so—and so—it is very rarely that I get upon a horse.”

He leaned in at the carriage window, speaking low, as desirous not to be overheard.

“It seems, then, that mademoiselle denies herself whatever pleasure she thinks is *too dangerous and too dear!*”

He looked straight in her eyes, and Louise blushed again to the temples, for she knew that her secret was found out.

CHAPTER VI.

DECLARED.

“MONSIEUR LE GRAND, you are an angel! I have had a heavenly ride, and I love both you and Charlemagne dearly.”

Thus Athénée de Mortemar, patting her horse's neck in an attitude that displayed her beautiful figure to perfection, and fixing the Grand Écuyer with a glance that knocked twenty years off his age on the spot.

She had been foremost of the courtiers in the chase, and had attracted the King's notice; but, whether from calculation or a habit of riveting her whole attention on the matter in hand, it appeared even to her own sex that she rather avoided than provoked the attention of her sovereign. Notwithstanding the weather and the gallop, she looked neither heated nor dishevelled. Charlemagne, too, stepped lightly and proudly under his rider. Monsieur le Grand thought he never beheld so matchless a pair, and did not scruple to tell her so.

“I believe, without vanity, I saw as much of the chase as the rest,” said she, piercing the old nobleman with another of her brightest glances. “When we attend the *curée* this evening, Monsieur le Grand, I shall expect you to pay me a compliment on my riding in presence of the whole court.”

“I will pay it now,” he answered. “This evening there is no *curée*.”

“How no *curée*?”

"One cannot have a *curée*, at least in France, without a deer."

"How no deer, then, Monsieur le Grand?"

"For a reason, Mademoiselle de Mortemar. His Majesty gave orders that the stag should be saved. His Majesty's orders must be obeyed, even by the maids of honour; and the stag is safe enough in the forest at this moment. We will hunt him some other time, and you shall ride *Charlemagne* again."

Athénée pondered. "It seems strange," said she, after a pause. "The hounds had caught the poor beast. I heard the bay myself. Why were they forbidden to kill it?"

"Because Mademoiselle de la Vallière interceded with the King," was the answer. "His Majesty at once ordered the piqueurs to run in and save the creature's life. It was a stag of sixteen, too," added Monsieur le Grand, with a grave smile.

Athénée made no reply. She seemed lost in thought, and, for the space of several seconds, gave herself up to reflection. It was not the custom of this young lady, however, to hesitate before acting: the dismissal of Monsieur le Grand with a bow, while she looked back among the courtiers for another cavalier, seemed an immediate result of her cogitations, followed by a sweet smile of welcome accorded to a handsome youth with golden locks and kind blue eyes, who brought his horse at a bound to her side.

"Monsieur," said she, "you have been discreet to-day. I am satisfied with you."

"Then you might call me Henri," was the reply, in a tone of unreserved devotion, that no woman, least of all Mademoiselle de Mortemar, could misunderstand.

"Well, Henri, then. You left me when I made you a sign. You are reasonable, you are obedient—in short, you are a good child; and now you shall ride with me all the way home."

Athénée would have sacrificed him without scruple to gain one step on the ladder she had resolved to climb ; but it suited her present purpose to encourage him ; and, so long as it seemed more profitable, it was, of course, more agreeable to give pleasure than pain.

Good-natured and good-hearted are not precisely convertible terms.

With the nice observation of a courtier, and the quick perception of a woman, she gathered from the scant words and dry smile of Monsieur le Grand that her friend, Louise de la Vallière, had made since morning an extraordinary advance in the favour of the King. Remembering the girl's own sentiments, confided to herself, she began to speculate on the possible and probable results of such mutual goodwill, as affecting her own interests, and came to the conclusion that it would be well to tighten, by all practicable means, her hold on the affections of a young lady who seemed likely to obtain great influence at court. Louise was devoted to her brother ; Henri le Blanc was devoted to herself. It would be agreeable, or at least amusing, no less than advantageous, to rivet fast this additional link in her fortunes.

She could always give the man his dismissal, thought Athénée, when he ceased to be pleasant ; much more, then, when he ceased to be profitable. In the meantime, she would rule his sister through him, and the King through his sister. Bah ! she had only to keep steadily advancing in the course she had proposed herself. Louise was pretty ; yes, pretty enough in the beauty of youth. Simple, too, and innocent as a milk diet ! But men did not go on drinking milk all their lives, and she had seen them weary of faces quite as fair, hearts quite as tender, long before these had faded, or those become insensible to pain. Yes ; they grew tired of milk, and turned—oh, so greedily !—to wine. She knew well how to pour it out, she thought—not too lavish,

not too sparing—always with a fresh flavour and sparkle in the glass!

Such aspirations and reflections led her a long way from Charlemagne, and Henri, and the green alleys in the forest of Fontainebleau.

“You are absent, mademoiselle, and preoccupied,” said he, after a silence that had lasted a quarter of a league. “Those eyes of yours are looking at something or somebody very far away.”

He did not dare tell her, nor did she need to be told, how beautiful he thought them.

“I have a headache,” she answered, rousing herself; “there is thunder in the air. I am sure of it when I feel like this. And, Henri, do you know, thunder is the only thing in the world I am afraid of.”

He would have liked to tell her how he asked no better than to stand between her and the lightning, though it should strike him dead. But she had put Charlemagne into a canter, and it is difficult for the most practised rider to impart tender sentiments to a lady who persists in keeping a horse’s length in advance. That distance she preserved steadily till they reached a wide space in the very heart of the forest, where tables were being prepared by the royal servants for a banquet in open air after the labours of the chase.

If to be princely is to be magnificent in attire, refined in luxury, punctilious in etiquette, and lavish to profusion in expenditure, then was Louis Quatorze the greatest prince that Europe ever saw.

Persons may be found who more admire such characters as Gustavus Adolphus, Peter the Great, Charles XII. of Sweden, or our own William of Orange; but I doubt much, until he had utterly ruined his kingdom and brought his subjects to starvation, if any monarch of civilised times was so worshipped by his people as Louis le Grand.

They were imposed on by his buildings, his huntings, his travellings in state, his meals in public, his entertainments to the whole nobility of France, his very campaigns, in which marches and countermarches, battles, sieges, and retreats, were conducted like levees and court receptions, under the eyes of ladies, and in full dress.

Did not his musketeers dance into action with a band of violins playing at their front? Did not his head cook die on his own sword because the roast meat at one of the King's tables was insufficient by a dish?

"We shall dine here," said Athénée, while she dropped from her saddle lightly as a bird from a bough. "You may come and speak to me twice during the afternoon—no more. If we dance on the grass, I will give you the third couranto. You are not to thank me,—certainly not to kiss my hand. Adieu! No—*au revoir!*"

Then she disappeared in a thicket, which formed a sylvan tiring-room for accommodation of the court ladies, leaving Henri le Blanc almost as much in love with her as his sister was with the King.

Every arrangement that foresight could suggest had been made for the comfort of this luxurious hunting-party. There were arbours woven for the household, wherein to rearrange the splendour of their dresses disordered by the chase; there was forage for the horses, and a number of grooms to attend to their wants; there were coaches to convey the whole party home at sunset; there was music hidden in an adjoining copse; and there were three tables served with gold plate, and laid for a hundred guests, beneath the green-wood tree. The sky, too, had clouded over, and a cool breeze stole gratefully on the heated cheeks of lords and ladies, who had ridden since morning under the blaze of a summer sun.

At a cross table, raised above the other two, the King took

his seat, with Madame, his sister-in-law, on his right hand. Here were a few more places occupied by blood relations of the sovereign.

These distinctions of birth were never overlooked when the King was present. His ceremonious politeness to those of his own family seemed regulated in exact proportion to their claims of kindred and order of succession to the throne. For his other guests he found gracious words and looks. Confidential with a duke, cordial to a peer of France, kindly for his own household, and attentive to all, he never himself forgot, nor suffered others for one moment to forget, that he was an absolute monarch, accountable to none for anything he might say or do, and deferring to the rules of society for the simple reason that its very code originated with himself.

To-day, while his tones were measured, his expressions well chosen as usual, the King's looks wandered down one of the tables to its lower end, where, like fine birds in fine feathers, clustered a bevy of maids of honour, laughing, gesticulating, talking low and fast,—all but one, who sat pale and silent in their midst.

She had enough to think of, and, though she never raised her eyes from her plate, she saw, not a naked little Cupid with a burning torch setting fire to the garments of the Venus who sheltered him, as represented in delicate colours on the porcelain, but a white horse's head embossed with foam, and a handsome, kingly face looking over the mane into her own, so kind, so tender, so loving, that it seemed to draw the very heart out of her breast with the magic of its smile.

"Madame," however, who was eating off gold, found nothing so attractive in the metal as to prevent her watching every glance of the King's eye, every turn of his countenance. The English blood in her veins had neither cooled her rashness of speech nor moderated her appetite for admiration, her jealousy of power. She was just enough of a Stuart to

see clearly the one side of a question, to ignore the other, and to defy the consequences of the whole. Once, twice, she moved uneasily in her chair; then she lost patience, and spoke unadvisedly with her lips.

"A clemency truly royal has spared our stag," said she maliciously; "but your Majesty does not yet seem to have abandoned the chase!"

The blood flew to the King's brow. His courtiers, not daring to look up, occupied themselves assiduously with their plates.

"It is my prerogative to pardon," answered Louis in a polite and cutting tone. "I have occasion to exercise it, Madame, more often than I could wish."

"Your Majesty sets a higher value, no doubt, on your prerogative of following whatsoever game you please in field and forest," returned the undefeated princess. "We call it liberty of 'vert and venison' in England; but it has limits in my country. The rights of royalty are better understood in France."

The flush deepened on the King's face. He repressed with difficulty the sarcasm that rose to his lips—such a sarcasm as would have reflected little credit on himself, or her against whom it was directed, when the Count de Guiches, who, avowedly in love with one of her attendants, was also a professed admirer of Madame herself, came to the rescue.

"In France, sire," said he, with a laugh and a bow, "not even our Jupiter has any control over his thunder. If your Majesty could postpone this storm a little, we should be grateful, for in five minutes not one of us but will be soaked to the very bones!"

While he spoke, indeed, a darkness like that of night had gathered round. A drop large as a crown-piece fell on his upturned face, another in the King's glass. A breeze came hissing through the forest. A flash of lightning, blue,

forked, and vivid, played round the table, followed by a scream from the ladies, and an awful peal of thunder that crackled, and roared, and rumbled overhead. Down came the rain in headlong sheets of water, and for once, regardless of precedence or etiquette, the party scattered in every direction, king, princes, princesses, lords and ladies, servants and all, flying each for the nearest shelter that could be found.

The coaches, grooms, and horses remained at too great a distance to be available. The arbours in which dresses had been adjusted afforded no resistance to so heavy a storm. The courtiers were compelled to cower under bank, bush, or tree, wherever they could find covert, like the very beasts of the field.

In this general flight there were certain couples, no doubt, who found themselves thrown together by extraordinary good luck to share the same refuge; and Athénée de Mortemar, notwithstanding her terror, admitted that she had passed a very pleasant quarter of an hour during the fiercest of the storm; but Louise, who had less presence of mind, lost her head completely, and ran wildly from tree to tree, terrified alike by the thunder, the lightning, and the rain that would spoil her dress, besides wetting her to the skin.

She never knew how it happened. An arm supported, a touch guided her; a voice whispered encouragement in her ear. It seemed like a dream. She found herself leaning against the stem of a beech-tree in full leaf, impervious to rain as the roof of a house, trembling, yet tranquil, reassured and happy, with the King standing hat in hand by her side.

A moment's reflection brought the impulse to fly; but Louis, with a gesture of deference that his dignified bearing made doubly flattering, placed himself before her.

"Is it possible, mademoiselle," said he, "that you fear

my presence more than the storm? I am indeed an unhappy prince to be dreaded where I am most desirous of being loved."

How her heart beat! Those low, pleading tones; that respectful, chivalrous air; submission from the monarch, admiration from the man; above all, the ring of truth in his deep, grave voice, made wild work with feelings she had long cherished, but kept down.

The girl hardly knew what she was saying.

"Loved, sire!" she repeated. "Loved! Oh! you must surely know that never prince on earth was honoured and loved as you are—by all."

"By all!" he whispered. "That only means by none. I am a king indeed, and, as king, I command the good-will, even the attachment, of my people. But what is loyalty compared to love? Ah, mademoiselle, one voice alone has ever spoken to my heart! That voice I overheard by a happy accident in the dark of midnight, and it came from a young girl, beautiful as an angel, with whom I had not so much as exchanged a look. Do you know, mademoiselle, who that young girl was, and what she said?"

Her blushes might have answered him. There was no need to speak, and she held her tongue.

"That gentle voice confessed a liking," whispered Louis, "not for the monarch, but the man. It protested, if he were only a subject, he would be far more dangerous"—here he put her hand to his lips—"and far more dear."

"Your Majesty remembers distinctly enough," she faltered, and then would have given anything to recall her words.

She had been so bold that night with Athénée: why was she so frightened now? Yet she would not have changed places at this moment with any woman in the world.

Half triumphant, half ashamed, agitated, happy, yet

woefully embarrassed, she plunged deeper and deeper in the mire.

"Forgive me, sire," she murmured. "I was persuaded we were alone. I could not imagine we were overheard. I spoke as I would have spoken to my own self, in my own room. What must your Majesty have thought of me? It is enough to make one die of shame only to remember it!"

"It is enough to make one die of happiness to remember every word!" replied Louis. "Ah, mademoiselle, it is you who must grant forgiveness to the listener! He overheard you, I pledge the honour of a king, by the merest accident; and now he sues for pardon on his knees that he dares to remind you of the hope you kindled so unconsciously, and entreats permission to cherish that hope secretly, silently, but eternally, in his heart!"

What could she say? What could she do?

He was kneeling at her feet, this great, this powerful sovereign, whose lightest word affected the interests of Europe; and she, a girl of eighteen, could make him so happy with a look! Is it strange that she yielded it? One fond and fleeting glance that told him all! Then she implored him to stand up.

"Your Majesty's attitude," she said, "is becoming neither to you nor to me. Rise, sire, I beseech you! See! the sky is clearing, the rain has ceased. You will be sought for everywhere. Even I shall be missed—and—and—— Oh, sire, for pity's sake, leave me, leave me, and go away at once!"

She burst into tears, and hid her face in her hands. The storm had passed over. The day was so far spent, that it seemed high time to gain the carriages, and return home without more delay. Louis, whose heart was really touched, resolved to make a circuit through the forest, and come in on his courtiers from an exactly opposite direction, so that if his prolonged absence should have aroused suspicion, it

might be diverted from the real companion of his refuge, for whose isolation, in a place of shelter, the weather offered sufficient excuse. But he could not leave her thus with wet eyes; and the King's voice was very low and tender while pleading for one moment more to say farewell: he gently removed the white hands from that blushing beautiful face, which was beginning to exercise so strange an influence on his thoughts and conduct.

"I will do all you wish," he whispered. "I will even leave you when you bid me. But, Louise—may I call you Louise just this once?—will you try to love me?"

"I will try *not!*" she answered, smiling through her tears. Then, with one more pressure of her hand, he vanished through the wood, knowing too well that the game was his own. There might be anxiety, fluctuations, reverses, but he was sure to win at last.

It was only a question of time.

CHAPTER VII.

QUO NON ASCENDAM ?

"TRANSLATE it for me, monsieur. I have no more Latin than serves a good Catholic and a woman for her Pater-noster."

The speaker was Athénée de Mortemar, looking saucily in Henri le Blanc's face while she waited for an answer.

She might have waited a long time. The dead languages were at no period a favourite study with French officers, and Henri must have confessed his ignorance, but for the passing of a smart young abbé ready and willing to answer any question, on any subject, so handsome a lady might propound.

"How high shall I not climb ?" explained the churchman with an elaborate bow. "Mademoiselle will observe it is the motto of our magnificent host, and surmounts his crest, a squirrel pursued by a snake. It is an ambitious sentiment," he added with a grin, "and one that mademoiselle can little appreciate, being herself, in wit and beauty, at the very top of the tree."

For reply, she swept him so haughty a curtsy as seemed morally equivalent to a kick of dismissal ; then turned to Henri with a look of compunction, almost of pain, in her bright expressive eyes.

"I like it," said she ; "it is a noble sentence. Branch by branch, why should the creature stop till it climbs to the very sky ? And if a branch or two must be broken, is that

the squirrel's fault? Henri, I have something to say to you. Let us pass into one of those cool rooms opening on the terrace. Here it is suffocating, and there are too many people. Give me your arm."

They were in a palace, though it belonged to a private gentleman ; guests at an entertainment costly and magnificent enough to excite the jealousy of the King himself. Banquet after banquet, ball after ball, succeeded each other, at that sumptuous period, so incessantly as to leave no day without its parade of luxury, prodigality, and excess. The chase already described at Fontainebleau was followed, with scarcely an interval of breathing-time, by Monsieur Fouquet's reception of the King and his whole court in a stately edifice its owner was pleased to call his "little country house at Vaux."

The Minister of Finance, for reasons, perhaps, neither prudent nor creditable, had resolved that on this occasion he would outvie in splendour and extravagance the master who had made him rich. He followed out his idea so recklessly as to elicit from his jealous sovereign an expression of marked disapproval and dislike.

"I cannot invite you to visit me at home," said the King, looking round him in obvious displeasure. "You would consider yourself too poorly lodged after such a house as this."

It was splendid, no doubt—an enchanted palace, ornamented with profusion rather than good taste, yet too rich to be called gaudy ; too warm and bold in colouring, too free from anything paltry or commonplace, to be stigmatized as vulgar. "The worst that can be said," observed a wit when challenged to find fault, "is that it smells of gold."

Prominent amongst its decorations, the minister's fancy had prompted him to fill every vacant space with his own richly emblazoned coat-of-arms. Doors, walls, and pillars were

plastered with insignia fabulous as the achievements they professed to symbolize, and surmounted by the vain-glorious motto, "Quo non ascendam?"

For the rest, everything that luxury could suggest, or ingenuity devise, seemed collected here to challenge approval from guests whose fastidiousness had been cultivated in the splendours of the court. Here was a picture worth half-a-dozen villages; there a statue cheap at the fee-simple of a provincial town. Exotics, porcelain, jewellery, shawls, tapestry, amber, brocade, satin, and cloth of gold, were grouped, draped, piled, and scattered about with a prodigality that had something grand in its barbaric recklessness of cost, while the greatest personages in France moved slowly to and fro through all this glittering display, to examine and admire with many polished phrases of gratification and good-will.

Athénée's cheek was a shade paler than usual, and she leaned heavily on her cavalier's arm while he led her to a seat in the embrasure of a lofty window looking on the terrace.

"You are fatigued, mademoiselle," said Henri in a tone of concern. "You suffer from the heat, which is frightful."

Her eyes were fixed on a gaudy coat-of-arms, with its emblematic squirrel; they seemed to brighten while she answered, "I am never fatigued; and if I suffer, do you not think, monsieur, I am too proud to confess it?"

"Your pride becomes you well, like your court dress. You were born to be a great lady, mademoiselle, and those who love you will be the best pleased to see how high you are destined to rise."

"Do you *really* mean it? Oh, Henri! how good you are, how chivalrous, how worthy of my confidence!"

"Confidence! Is that all? Yes. So the game is played. Love, sorrow, self-sacrifice, a life's devotion, on one side, and on the other—confidence!"

“Do not say such bitter things. Have you not learned to know me yet? Is it possible, Henri, that you do not perceive my aims, my ambition, the force of my character? Would you wish me to remain for ever a simple lady in waiting to Madame, and nothing more? Oh, men, men! how selfish they are!”

“Go on; you like to see me suffer. Of all reproaches, this is the one I have deserved most.”

“I do not say that. You are so hot, so impatient; you take me up so quick. Can you not see how I am situated? What would you do in my place?”

“I would keep what I had won. Only women have courage to throw the whole cargo into the sea. I could not—no, I *could* not sacrifice a heart that beat for me alone, to gain the very topmost round of the ladder, even if it led up to paradise.”

He spoke as though sorely hurt and angered. None the less did the exigencies of society compel him to preserve an unmoved countenance and an equal tone of voice.

She knew so well how to manage him! There were few more skilful players at that game, which is essentially ruinous to the loser, than Athénée de Mortemar. She gave him one of the sugared smiles she could call up at will, and laid her gloved hand gently on his sleeve.

“To possess a woman’s confidence,” said she, “is to have the key of her heart. Henri, I can depend upon *you*! Whoever blames, whoever deserts me, it will not be Henri le Blanc!”

He bowed his head in reply. The simple gesture betrayed more of obedience, more of devotion, than if he had thrown himself at her feet.

“I see a future before me,” she continued, “that you of all men would be the last to darken or destroy. Once launched on my career, there is no success to which I cannot

aspire. When I rise, monsieur, be sure my friends—those I esteem, those I love—will share my elevation. But I must obtain a starting-point. I must have space to breathe, liberty to expand my wings. Henri, I am going to be married.”

No answer. Only another bow, slow and gradual, as if under pressure of some overwhelming weight. When he lifted his face it was white and drawn, like the face of a man who has been dead for an hour. She felt a momentary shock, a twinge of compassion and concern.

“Speak to me, Henri,” she whispered. “Don’t look like that, for the love of heaven! You must have expected it; you must have known it would come, sooner or later.”

At this game, you see, people are not obliged to stake coin of equal value. It seemed a less serious matter to her, who was playing counters against gold. Henri, on the contrary, like a true Frenchman, waged his whole fortune, capital, income, and all.

He was a gallant loser, nevertheless, and could see it swept away calmly, politely, and without making a scene.

“I offer my compliments, mademoiselle,” said he. “I hope you will be as happy as—as I wish!”

The measured tone was creditable to his nerve. Only a woman who had learnt its every inflection could have detected the tremble in his voice.

Her own was far less steady. She continued, nevertheless, speaking very fast, with that gesticulation of hand and wrist he thought so graceful, and knew so well.

“It is a station that becomes me. It is a home where I can shelter without shame. It affords an opening from which I see my way to the highest rank, the noblest destiny. What would you have? A young girl at our court of France is not the Grand Turk, to throw her handkerchief amongst the crowd, and choose whom she likes. It would

be monstrous, unheard of ! We must not even speak of such things ! No ; this has been arranged for me, and I am content."

"Because you love him ?"

"Because I esteem and regard him. Because I have passed my word. Because, because—— Bah ! Because things must be as they are. Monsieur de Montespan is well born, well taught, polite, amiable, discreet. But he is not Henri le Blanc."

It seemed a small crumb of comfort, but it was thrown to a famished man ; a slender strand of rope, but he snatched it eagerly, for the ship was going down under his very feet. A week ago, had the rumour reached his ears that Athénée could think of bestowing her hand on another, he would have laughed at the wild impossibility. But yesterday he would have told himself that, could such an affliction overtake him, nothing would be left but to fall on his sword and die. Yet now, when it was come, behold ! he clung to the vainest shadow of consolation. Her heart, at least, was still his own ; girls were not accountable for falsehood in such matters ; he still held the first place in her affections ; she sacrificed herself to a sense of duty, and—and life was long ; time brought about many changes ; he would never give her up, come what might ! So is it ever with mankind in shipwreck of the affections. The weakest of swimmers struggles somehow to the surface, shakes the water out of his eyes, looks about him, and gets his breath. If the jolly-boat has capsized, and the pinnacle, he constructs a raft, or, failing that, gets hold of a cask, a plank, a broken oar, a straw ! Morally and physically, nobody goes down without an effort. The first impulse of humanity, after the shrewdest of blows, is to collect its energies, and persuade itself that, after all, things might have been worse.

"You will have new duties," he said, trying to speak

calmly, "new cares, new ties and interests. I shall pass out of your life as if I had never existed, and before you have been married six months you will forget the very name of Henri le Blanc."

"You must not speak so loud," she answered, for he had raised his voice enough to attract the notice of a lady who at that instant passed outside the window, attended by some half-a-dozen gentlemen. "Do you know who she is? She heard every word you said. Happily, we are safe with *her*."

The lady did, in fact, turn a fair and graceful head, a pale refined face, and an exceedingly piercing glance towards the pair, but, observing them engrossed in their own concerns, increased her pace, and, with some sally that provoked a burst of laughter, diverted the attention of her companions from their tête-à-tête.

"Who was it?" asked Le Blanc, listlessly enough, seeing that only one person in the world could interest him to-day. "And why is she to be considered so trustworthy? Simply, I suppose, because she is a *woman*!"

He could not repress the sneer. Athénée accepted it with a good-humour that ought to have opened his eyes.

"There are women, and women," said she. "I am sure of sympathy from that one, because she has passed through a woman's experience over and over again!"

"Is she, then, so old?" he asked, glancing after the light and well-turned figure as it moved across the lawn.

"Beauty never grows old," answered Athénée with a mocking laugh; "and she has been a beauty for fifty years. That is Mademoiselle de l'Enclos—the woman I envy most in the world!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FIRST PRIZE.

“AND why?” said Henri, less from curiosity than in the hope of prolonging his interview with the lady he loved.

“Listen. I am going to tell you. Do you know her history? It is a fable, a romance, a fairy tale. She possesses the one gift for which every woman would be content to exchange all others—the power of making herself beloved wherever she sets her fancy. The charm, too, seems inexhaustible; or, unless she is much maligned, she would have worn it out long ago.”

“Why should *you* envy her? Have you not the same power yourself? And is it such an amusing pastime, then, to make all the world as unhappy as you make me?”

She heard, but scarcely heeded. Who shall say how far her thoughts had flown? what busy schemes were seething in that handsome head; what a wild ambition was gnawing at that wilful, capricious, yet not unpitying heart? She was meditating on the notorious bargain of Ninon de l'Enclos with the mysterious little man in black, and estimating the price she would herself be willing to pay for his diabolical assistance.

“It is the strangest story,” she continued thoughtfully, “and true; yes, every word of it true. My director says so; and Henri, you know that, whatever my faults, I am always a woman who believes. Well, when Mademoiselle de l'Enclos was still young—two or three years younger

than I am now,—no compliments, monsieur,—one morning her people came to say that a strange gentleman desired to see her alone—quite alone—not even a maid in the room, and insisted with a perseverance that would take no denial. Nothing in a justaucorps, I imagine, ever *did* frighten Mademoiselle de l'Enclos, and the visitor was admitted without further parley. Figure to yourself a little old man, dressed in black, grey, wrinkled, with bright burning eyes, a villainous expression of countenance, and his head on one side. I should have fainted, Henri, I know I should; but not till I heard what he had to say.

“‘Do not alarm yourself,’ he began. ‘I never do young ladies any harm; quite the reverse. Never mind who I am: I was behind the door when you were born. Your destiny is in my hands. You can be the most famous woman of your time. I have two gifts reserved on purpose for you: make your choice. It lies between a crown of royalty and a beauty that shall never fade. You have only to ask. Say the word; which will you have?’

“‘If I may keep which I like,’ she answered, laughing, ‘I will take the beauty that never fades.’

“She was right, Henri, for surely that was the way to have both. Then the little man pulled out a dreadful pocket-book, with a black cover and red leaves.

“‘Inscribe your name, mademoiselle,’ said he, ‘and swear secrecy; I ask no more.’

“You may believe she promised at once; and touching her on the shoulder with an ivory wand, he made her his little speech.

“‘I give you unfading beauty, and irresistible power over the hearts of men. I have been going to and fro on earth four thousand years, and have found but four women worthy to be so endowed—superb Semiramis, Helen the fair and false, dark-browed Cleopatra, and Diane de Poitiers with her

golden hair. You, too, shall be admired, sought after, and beloved like these. You shall preserve unfailing health, unfading youth. At an age when other women are grey and wrinkled, you shall bloom at your brightest and your best. You shall dazzle the eye; better still, you shall enslave the heart; and on whomsoever you set your lightest fancy, he shall love you to distraction. Farewell! I shall see you once more, many years hence—the day before you die!’

“Then he vanished through the keyhole—up the chimney—what do I know? Firm as were her nerves, I fancy she never could tell how he took his departure. What think you, Henri? Was it *Somebody* in person? Had she bargained with the Evil One for her soul? And yet she is not a Huguenot, nor a Jansenist: she goes to mass regularly as the King himself. What are you thinking of? You are not listening to a word I say.”

“Shall I tell you? I was thinking the little man in black will never come to *you*. Why should he? I know nothing of Semiramis, Helen, Cleopatra. I do not believe in such people, but I have seen a picture of the Duchesse de Valentinois, and so have you. She is not fit to buckle the shoes of Mademoiselle de Mortemar. Athénée, Athénée, how I wish you could be less beautiful, less winning!—that I could love you less by ever such a little! I only live in your presence; but it is torture—torture, do you understand?—and yet a torture I prefer to every happiness elsewhere.”

“Do you know that is very well said, and you are more than amiable to-day?” she answered, rising from her seat. “You improve, monsieur—don’t look hurt—you *do* improve; and, Henri, take me back to the great hall. I shall not forget you: do not think it for an instant. See! something has gone wrong. The King is vexed: I know it by the way he carries his head.”

While she spoke they were already in the crowd of courtiers, who seemed unwilling even to interchange looks till the storm that had ruffled their sovereign's brow, usually so calm and majestic, should pass away. Louis seemed unusually disturbed. He had turned his back in the most marked manner on his host; and, taking his brother's arm, led him aside, while he said something in his ear, of which the bitterness might be inferred by his emphatic gestures, and a peculiar manner in which, when displeased, he swelled out and stiffened his figure to its utmost dimensions. Madame, too, looked on with a scowl that boded no good for any one concerned; while Fouquet himself, the giver of the feast, was covered with confusion. Not all the magnificence of his entertainment, the deference of his guests, nor the splendour of his squirrels, seemed able to restore his self-command. It was his own doing. He had braved the storm, and at last it broke over his head.

The minister had been devoting himself openly to Mademoiselle de la Vallière, careless alike of his royal rival's disquietude and the coldness, not to say aversion, with which his advances were received by the young lady herself. He was a busy man: he had no leisure for the romance, scarcely for the refinements, of life. His whole time was spent in the calculation and expenditure of money. He believed gold would buy all; that it was only a question of figures, and that every woman, like every man, had a price. He hazarded some remarks to that effect while conversing with Louise, and she rose hurriedly from her seat, with a flushed face and troubled eye, that showed how deeply she was moved.

The King, furtively watching every turn of her countenance, could scarce contain his anger. Madame, who already suspected him, was unable to conceal her spite. Monsieur, pleasure-loving and good-natured, listened to his brother's invectives like one who would fain have been

twenty leagues off; and everybody in the circle seemed to share his sentiments. It was such a complication as could only have originated in such a society at such a period, and Athénée took in the situation at a glance.

She crossed the room to her friend's side, shielding Mademoiselle de la Vallière from remark, and covering her embarrassment with ready tact.

The King did not fail to observe this interposition, and rewarded it with a gracious smile.

"They are a pretty pair," observed Monsieur, following his brother's glance, and blowing them a kiss from the tips of his dainty gloves. "Who can wonder that they meet with admiration? Faith, sire, you are a little hard on your purse-bearer! What would you have? Blue eyes, black eyes, bright eyes, and soft eyes; a man should be triple gilt all over to escape without a scratch in such a court as yours!"

The King laughed, and recovered his good-humour. For the present his displeasure seemed appeased. The storm had blown over; but clouds were still gathering on the horizon, and his minister's downfall was none the less certain that he thought well to reserve it for a more convenient time.

Madame, too, clearing her brows, and controlling herself, not without an effort, accosted him with a profound curtsy.

"Your Majesty," said she, "must deign to submit yourself to my wheel of fortune. It awaits you in the next room."

"To be broken on it?" asked the King, laughing, for his ill-humour had quickly vanished.

"Not entirely broken," was the answer, "seeing it is an institution of my own. And yet, you know the proverb, sire: if there is any truth in it, who ought to be so unfortunate as your Majesty in games of chance?"

This with a suppressed sigh, and a glance intended to convey as much again as it really meant.

Louis bowed low, bade his sister-in-law precede him, stole one more look at Mademoiselle de la Vallière, and followed Madame into the next room, where a lottery she had organized was going on with much laughter and applause, the prizes creating no little excitement, and bursts of merriment proclaiming from the bystanders an intense appreciation of the blanks.

"You are disturbed, my dear," said Athénée to her friend, "and why?"

The latter was still panting, half in anger, half in fright. The flush on her cheek had deepened those blue eyes till she looked so lovely that even Mademoiselle de Mortemar, who by no means undervalued her own charms, felt a little pang of jealousy and mortification.

"How dared he?—how dared he?" exclaimed Louise. "I wish I were a man!"

"I wish you were!" replied her friend, honestly enough. "But you have not told me all. Bah! my dear, 'tis a pig; and what can you expect from a pig but a grunt?"

"I never encouraged him to grunt at *me*!" answered the other. "What have I done that he should dare to think I could look at him for a moment—I who only implore to be let alone? He has no consideration—not even common politeness. The man is brutalised. Everybody must have heard him. Madame will declare I encouraged him, and they will all think so badly of me that I shall die of shame!"

"All? That means De Guiches and Bragelone. Believe me, my dear, they are too far gone. Nothing you could say or do would lower you one hair's breadth in their good opinion."

"I don't ask for their good opinion. I don't want them to speak to me, or look at me, or think of me. Athénée, it is unkind of you to say so. No, it isn't: you are always good, and I trust you as I trust my own heart."

Mademoiselle de Mortemar smiled. Perhaps she thought this implicit confidence misplaced in both instances, and changed the subject without delay.

"You are very well dressed, Louise. I make you my compliments on the colour of your ribbons. Do you know they match your eyes, my dear, and the bows somebody wears on his sleeves?"

Mademoiselle de la Vallière turned scarlet. It chanced, perhaps less entirely by accident than either would have protested, that on more than one occasion the trimmings of this young lady's dress and the bows on his Majesty's sleeves had corresponded to a shade. This happy coincidence afforded each of them some vague gratification incomprehensible, but to those who are putting off for the first time on the placid lake that empties itself into the rushing river that leads to the reef, the bar, the quicksands, and the stormy sea.

"I did not notice," answered Louise hurriedly, which was false; "but I love this colour best of all, and wear it whenever I can," which was true enough.

"We shall have an opportunity of comparing your mutual tastes," replied the other mischievously, "for I see the crowd falling back before his Majesty in the doorway. And, Louise, don't look as if you were going to faint. Here he comes."

The King was indeed advancing towards them with his deliberate and graceful step, looking about as if in search of some particular person, and carrying a costly bracelet in his hand. The courtiers watched his movements eagerly. Madame, never doubting he would offer the ornament to herself, assumed an air of simplicity and unconsciousness obviously put on for the occasion.

With an ambitious character, spoiled, it may be, by the servility and adulation of those about her, this princess could not bear to see the slightest notice accorded to any one but

herself. She was less a jealous woman than one rapacious of admiration, and in every society insisted on being the first object of attention. If relegated to the second place, she soon made the society understand its atmosphere would be darkened by a storm.

The King passed her without stopping. Row by row he threaded several lines of ladies, till he reached the chairs occupied by Louise and Athénée, who rose to receive him with profound curtsies, which he answered by as respectful a bow.

He smiled good-humouredly in her friend's face, but turned grave while he laid the bracelet gently in the hands of Louise, who was ready to sink with confusion, awe, and the wild delight of being near him—so near that she touched him with her dress.

"It is magnificent, sire," she murmured, returning, after examining, the precious stones, as if they had been brought her only to admire.

"Nay, mademoiselle," replied the King, with one of those glances that made her thrill and tremble all over, "after lying in such beautiful hands, the bracelet shall never return to mine."

And, with another low bow, he left her ; proud, happy, but frightened out of her wits.

She could not understand, though Athénée saw clearly, why, during the rest of the entertainment, she became an object of marked civility and attention from every one about the court. She was presented, at their express desire, to illustrious personages who had never condescended to notice her before ; great ministers whispered in her ear the petty scandals and small talk of the hour ; old generals bowed to her with feeble knees, and paid her antiquated compliments that wearied her exceedingly. More than one ambassador thought it his duty to measure the wit of "this little girl

with blue eyes," destined, as he foresaw, to make another complication in his delicate task, and resolved to start a courier that very night with dispatches to his government. Even the ladies crowded round, admiring her dress, her new bracelet, her face, her figure, and all that was hers. She gave little attention to the mystery, for her thoughts were far away; nevertheless, it puzzled her—she could not make it out.

Being a woman, she understood it better, perhaps, when the time came for her dismissal, and she swept her final curtsy to Madame before that great lady retired for the night.

"What is the matter, my dear?" said the Princess, with a jarring laugh that made the little term of affection sound more bitter than a curse. "You are not yourself this evening; you look as if you were dreaming. You must be in love!"

CHAPTER IX.

SLOW TORTURE.

As the King's interference had prevented their fighting, it was obvious that the Marquis de Bragelone and Count de Guiches must dine together on the first opportunity. Dining in the middle of the seventeenth century was a very elaborate affair. Gentlemen sat down at an early hour in the afternoon, and seldom rose, if their avocations permitted the indulgence, till it was time for supper. The leisure thus spent in conversation over the wine-cup was necessarily productive of that personal gossip which may be called scandal, and though men talked about horses, as they do to-day, for a space of time that could be calculated to a minute, yet, when their brains became heated, they invariably diverged to the only subjects they considered equally interesting—luck at the gaming-table, and the smiles of the other sex.

Every poet who writes about wine insists on its power to stimulate the imagination. The most hopeless and inveterate of prozers seems quickened by that spur in the head, which is proverbially worth two in the heel; and the dullest fancy cannot but borrow a tinge of warmer colour from the glass. What, then, was likely to be its effect on the keen southern vivacity, the warm southern blood, of Count de Guiches?

That young nobleman, dining at the quarters of the Marquis de Bragelone, sat in the place of honour on his host's right hand. One or two courtiers and some half-dozen officers of the Gardes Françaises completed the party. Good

company, good cheer, above all, good wine, had raised the spirits of the guests to their highest pitch. Everybody talked at once; and Count de Guiches, laughing, gesticulating, flourishing his glass, out-drunk and out-talked the rest. He seemed to overflow with mirth, good-fellowship, and enthusiasm. He quaffed off his wine to their health; he paid them extravagant compliments; he respected, he admired, he embraced them all. They were his brothers in arms—Frenchmen could not but be brothers in arms; they were the finest of soldiers, the best of comrades, the bravest of the brave. He felt but one regret, that he never had the honour to serve—what? To *die* on the field of glory in the ranks of the Gardes Françaises.

A young sub-lieutenant, who traced his lineage from those royal houses that enriched the blood of Montmorency, threw his arms round the Count's neck, kissed him on both cheeks, and burst into tears. Great applause; glasses broken, and calls for more wine.

"You pay us a high compliment," said De Bragelone. "No soldier should be a better judge of courage and conduct than the Count de Guiches. But he seems to forget that for brave men nothing is impossible; and if he is really desirous of joining our ranks, the King's favour and a heavy purse of gold will attain his object without the trouble of serving a single campaign!"

"Good! 'Tis an idea!" exclaimed the other. "Give me some wine. Your health, Bragelone. Ah, rogue! I thought to love you dearly as an adversary; yet I love you better as a friend. But no; I might, indeed, purchase a regiment of the Guard with so many pieces of gold. The regiment would be called by my name; I should come on parade as its colonel; I should answer for its appearance, its discipline, its efficiency under arms; I should draw the pay, too, after many deductions. But its fame, its illusions, its

services, exploits, campaigns, the traditions of its glory—these must be paid for with blood; and in these I should have no part. Believe me, gentlemen, money cannot buy honour!”

“It can buy a woman’s fast enough!” observed Montmorency, whose stammer obtained for his remarks an attention that their own value scarce deserved.

“I will back good looks against it,” replied a handsome lad of nineteen, stroking with complacency the moustache that had not yet come.

“Or notoriety,” said another, sending the ball round, which was not suffered to drop amongst his comrades.

“Or novelty.”

“Or contradiction.”

“Or jealousy.”

“Or sheer caprice that fancies a hump like Luxemburg’s.”

“Or ambition pure and simple, that aims at a crown, and covets it none the less because it binds the noblest brow and sets off the handsomest face in the whole court.”

The last speaker was De Guiches, who, having started the subject, and listened to the opinions of the company with edifying gravity, now pulled himself together, as it were, and shook his head, more in sorrow than in anger, perhaps—more in liquor than either.

De Bragelone winced. What made him think of a leafy glade, a dusty coach, a summer sun, and a pack of stag-hounds baying round their deer in the forest of Fontainebleau?

“We are all friends here,” continued De Guiches. “What do I say? *Friends!* We are comrades, we are brothers; we have no secrets one from the other. What! We have served together against the enemies of France. We laugh together; we drink together; we weep together. Yes, our

tears drop in the same glass. I open my heart to you all ; I make you sharers in my sorrow, my despair. De Bragelone, my distinguished and amiable colonel,—gentlemen, my brothers, I challenge your sympathy. Nevertheless, confidences must be respected ; we are men of honour. Shall I tell you a story ? Shall I speak to you in a parable ?”

“Tell it, tell it ! Fill your glass and speak out !” exclaimed one and all, while De Bragelone inwardly cursed the strength of his Burgundy, and its effects on the garrulity of his guest.

“I am a man of simple pleasures, chaste and quiet pursuits,” continued the Count, looking round him with shining eyes and a flushed face. “Others may love pomp and magnificence, gold and embroidery, satin and brocade to wear, Chambertin to drink : such is not my character. Could I follow my own tastes, I would walk afoot, plant vegetables in my garden, dress in homespun, and quench my thirst with water from the spring. You understand, my friends, a man cannot always do as he likes ; and, in good truth, such Burgundy as this is not to be despised. To your healths, gentlemen ! What was I saying ? In my researches after the pure, the pastoral, the simple, I chanced to find a little modest flower. What shall I call it ? A forget-me-not—yes, a forget-me-not, because of its eyes of blue—growing fresh and beautiful in the crevice of a garden wall. I had only to stoop—I who speak to you—and ready to my hand I might have gathered such an exotic as a prince would be proud to wear on his breast. I preferred to look and long, and stretch my arms towards the little blue flower on the garden wall. Was it a folly ? Was it a caprice ? What do I know ? On my honour, gentlemen, it was too strong for me, and I could not help myself. It grew out of reach—just out of reach. When I stood on tiptoe I could touch it, barely touch it, and that was all. Why did

I not leap, say you, and pluck it down with a wrench? Ah, gentlemen! I might have crushed and soiled the beauty of that modest little flower. And yet sometimes I wish I had. What was the result of my forbearance, my delicacy? Why, this: one day while I was stretching every limb to gain one inch, just one more inch of height, there came a taller man than me, and gathered my flower easily from the wall, and took it away with him, perhaps but to make one in a posy of many others,—who knows? I only know that I shall never see my forget-me-not blooming for me again! What matter? Mine to-day, yours to-morrow. 'Tis the fortune of war, comrades. Let us drink one more glass."

The guests looked in each other's faces, with raised eyebrows and covert smiles. To Montmorency and his young companions the Count's parable was easy of solution. De Guiches was drunk, and there was an end of it! But, for De Bragelone, every word had fallen on his heart like a drop of molten lead. He was not blind to the Count's declared admiration of Mademoiselle de la Vallière,—its ardour had, indeed, been the origin of their quarrel and subsequent friendship; nor was he able to divest himself of certain maddening suspicions that a greater and more formidable rival than Count de Guiches had lately entered the field. He argued over and over again that it was absurd, unlikely, impossible, the shadow of a shade. One smile on the face he loved would brighten all his sadness into sunshine; yet none the less did he chafe and brood over his misgivings, till the poison saturated his system, and the iron entered into his soul.

The party broke up noisily enough, and in the confusion of leave-taking, the embraces, the farewells, the searching for hats, and buckling on of swords, their host's preoccupation escaped notice from his guests. They had spent a pleasant afternoon. De Bragelone was the prince of entertainers,

and De Guiches, always good company, had to-day been better company than usual. Some were for duty, some were engaged elsewhere to supper, and one had a rendezvous of which he made no secret. The Marquis found himself alone with forebodings that only seemed darker for their contrast with the hilarity of his friends. The wine that made them gay had sunk him in despondency. He was gloomy, even morose. He walked to the window, scowled at the summer sunset, traversed the room with impatient strides; finally resolved to speak with Henri le Blanc at once, and urge on that somewhat indifferent brother the prudence of removing his sister from the dangers of a court.

Le Blanc, who, much to his own satisfaction, had flowered into a Black Mousquetaire of the most characteristic type, was restoring nature in his own quarters with a bowl of soup and a bottle of wine, after twenty-four hours on guard in the halls and corridors of the palace. He, too, had an aching heart hid away under his gold-laced justaucorps and his embroidered shirt. Nevertheless he found a ready welcome and a frank smile for his old comrade, whom he greeted with a swaggering cordiality quite *en mousquetaire*.

The Marquis seemed uneasy; his replies were short and embarrassed; he talked about the weather, the King's unfailing punctuality, the uniforms of the *gardes de corps*. Henri got up and closed the door, which was ajar.

"What is it, my friend?" said he. "You will not eat, neither will you drink. You have dined, you say, and with a merry party, yet you are not gay; on the contrary, I have seldom seen you so sad, so preoccupied. Ah, rogue! I have it. You bring me the length of his weapon. You have an affair on hand. You ask me to take him a cartel. Leave it to me, and it will arrange itself in a quarter of an hour. With brave men those matters can run alone. Yet no. I am stupid; I am pig-headed. You are not the man

to look grave for a fencing-bout; you love steel too well. It must be a difficulty of money. That is another matter. See, Marquis, I won fifty crowns at the King's table last night. They are in this purse. It is yours; take it, my dear Marquis. No? You shake your head. I am beat: I am puzzled. I can guess no more."

"Henri, Henri," replied the other gravely, "your thoughts run upon nothing but duelling and gambling. There are affairs in life far more important than a thrust in tierce or a winning card at lansquenet."

He paused. How should he approach the subject? He had not realised the difficulty of his task till now.

"I cannot think it!" said Henri. "The one makes life respectable; the other finishes it with decency. We have our necessities; and they must be supplied. By cards when we want money; by wine when we want wit; by a turn on the turf with the sharps when we want exercise. This is to go through the world *en mousquetaire*."

"Wine and steel we cannot do without," answered the Marquis; "but cards, Henri, will be your ruin,—they will strip the lace off your uniform, and the honour from your name. Stick to them long enough, and they will leave you at last without a character or a coat to your back. They are the devil's picture-books, and I wish I could burn every pack in France!"

Henri laughed. "The very words: precisely what Louise said the last time I saw her."

"It was of your sister I came to speak," continued De Bragelone, with so much emotion in his voice that the other never doubted he was about to make a proposal of marriage in due form, and reflected whether, as head of the family, he ought not to accept it conditionally, without prejudice to the more ambitious projects that were opening on her career. In his consultations with Athénée de Morte-

mar, that far-seeing young lady had not failed to enlarge on the advantages likely to accrue from his Majesty's obvious admiration of Mademoiselle de la Vallière, reminding him that the Queen was mortal, like other women, and insisting on the splendid future attainable by a man of spirit and enterprise, brother-in-law to the King of France.

"Of my sister, Marquis?" repeated Henri cordially. "There is no man to whom I would listen more readily on a subject that interests me so much."

"You love her?" continued De Bragelone in troubled accents.

"The question is not of *my* loving her," thought Henri; but he answered, "Of course I do!" readily enough.

"Then take her away from the court!" exclaimed De Bragelone. "Send her home to her mother at once. Believe me, Henri, this is no place for a young girl so beautiful, so innocent, so simple-minded. You might as well leave a dove unprotected in a cage of night-hawks."

"How unprotected, Marquis?" asked the other, colouring. "Has she not always her brother? It seems to me that I can be trusted to defend the honour of the Le Blancs."

"Do not be angry with me," pleaded the Marquis, sorely troubled to feel his interference was not taken in good part. "It is the deep interest with which your sister inspires me, the respect and admiration I entertain for her character, that make me so officious, so presuming. Henri, Henri, can you not see that the King himself is captivated by her grace, her beauty—above all, the charm of her manner, the guileless simplicity of her disposition? I tell you he is only waiting for a favourable moment to throw himself at her feet!"

"And what then, Monsieur le Marquis?" asked the other, with a certain stiffness of bearing that denoted defence, if not defiance.

"Are you blind, Henri?" expostulated the other, with

tears in his eyes. "Do you not see the future—the result? Surely, surely that angel of light and purity is worthy of a better fate!"

"We are an old family," answered Henri proudly, "but it is no disgrace even for the Le Blancs to ally themselves with the royal house of France. Pardon me, Marquis, if I observe that this conversation has gone far enough. Your advice is, no doubt, friendly, but it is also superfluous. No king ever crowned shall do Mademoiselle de la Vallière wrong; and permit me to say, you scarcely accord me justice when you infer that I cannot take care of my sister's honour as of my own. Let us speak of something else, monsieur, or wish each other good night."

"Good night, then," said De Bragelone sorrowfully, and returned to his quarters feeling he had done more harm than good.

CHAPTER X.

BROKEN ON THE WHEEL.

"THE Queen-mother, Athénée! I shall die of fright! I have never been alone with her in my life."

Mademoiselle de la Vallière seemed much disturbed. Her friend noticed the girl's agitation with a pitying smile.

"There is no fear of her being alone," she answered; "Madame is there also. Of the two, I think Anne of Austria the less formidable adversary; though, for my part, I should not be the least afraid of both together."

"Could you not come with me, Athénée? I should be happier if you were at my side."

"Bah! my dear, you provoke me with your want of enterprise. You *must* be a feeble player if you dare not trust your luck with the winning card in your hand. I would play him so boldly if I held the king! My poor frightened Louise, I can guess why they want you."

The blush that had risen to the other's temples died away, and she began to tremble.

"What shall I do?" she murmured. "What shall I say? Counsel me, Athénée. Do you think they will take me to task about *him*?"

"You are to be broken on the wheel, my dear, that is all. It's your own fault if you let them fasten you down for the torture. I know well what they mean. They send you an invitation, which is neither more nor less than a command. It is like an order for admission to the Bastille; there is no

excuse, and there is no escape. I have heard a surgeon say that of the many wounds he had dressed—pike, sabre, gunshot, what you will—the sorest were inflicted by a woman's tongue. And all your armour of proof, poor dear, is a little muslin and some starch; yet in your hand is a weapon that would insure victory if you dared only use it. How I wish it was for me to fight the battle, with the same advantages! Ha! you should see me fence and traverse to some purpose. I would undertake in one pass to disarm that old serpent, and to run Madame through the body in another. Listen, Louise: will you be guided by me? But, first, speak the truth. Do you *really* love him? I mean, tenderly, devotedly, foolishly, like a milkmaid?"

"Better than my life," was the answer.

"Then I cannot help you," replied Athénée, "and I pity you from the bottom of my heart."

Too true. The light in her blue eyes alone would have vouched for the sincerity of her confession. Louise de la Vallière had, indeed, merged her whole being in his, whose only defect seemed the splendour of his position, and whom she would have adored as unreservedly, and far more happily, had he been a peasant instead of a king.

It was the old story. To use the stilted metaphors of her own time, the little god of love had flown in at the windows of her eyes, and established his sovereignty in her heart. There indeed, like a child on a writing-table, he made sad havoc of all within reach. That which had once been orderly, useful, well arranged, became a desolation and a waste—a scene of riot and confusion, with the urchin laughing triumphant in the midst. It was not the work of a day, nor of a week. She had wept and prayed, battled and resisted; yet, time by time, she grew weaker, fonder, and fainter of heart. There were so many auxiliaries on the other side, such treacherous allies on her own. There was uncertainty, there

was propinquity, there was restraint, just galling enough to make the rebound delightful when it was taken off. There was gratified vanity, of course, though of this she had little, as of ambition none whatever; and, above all, there was the mystic property—inexplicable, irrational, and irresistible—that makes of one face the whole solar system for its worshipper, and all the rest of the universe a blank.

To see him the centre of his splendid court, and feel that, while she must not approach nor address him, a glance, a gesture, the turn of a hand, the knot of a ribbon, made for them a language far more eloquent than speech; to know that, in council with his ministers, in deliberations affecting the fate of Europe, her image could cheer and lighten his labour (he had told her so a hundred times), as a gleam of sunshine illuminates the brown landscape of the ploughman's toil; to be sure that, whatever little misunderstanding might arise during the day—and people in love are very hard and unjust towards each other—neither (for this was their mutual agreement) would go to rest till it was cleared away;—all this was delightful as it was dangerous; but, by her own confession, the happiest moments of her life—those in which she drank deepest of the poison that destroyed her—were brought by the summer evenings, when, in attendance on Madame, she drove out with other maids of honour, and the King, on horseback, flitted here and there amongst them like a butterfly in a garden of flowers. If the tramp of his horse's feet, if the flutter of his plumes on the breeze, possessed a sweet and indescribable charm, what must have been the effect of his enamoured bearing, his soft whispers, and the tender glances of those blue eyes that haunted her even in her dreams?

He was so careful, too, of her comfort, of her good name; so prudent, so judicious, so sympathetic with her very thoughts; never provoking remark by his attentions, yet

never allowing her to feel she was neglected—least of all, in favour of another. What wonder that a true, tender, and generous young heart gave itself to him unreservedly ; or that the time arrived at last when this precaution, this self-denial, seemed irksome and superfluous—when this subservient suitor became an exacting and somewhat imperious lord ?

The first flavour of the cup that most of us have to drain is sweet and intoxicating, no doubt, but there are bitter drops to be tasted long before we come to the dregs. None are, perhaps, so bitter to a woman as the reproaches of her own sex, and of these poor Louise was now about to drink her fill.

Beautifully dressed, but with a precision strictly according to the rules of etiquette, she made her way to the apartments of the Queen-mother, was received in an ante-room by two of her ladies, and, trembling from head to foot, found herself, she scarcely knew how, in presence of the woman she most dreaded in the world.

Queen-consort, queen-regent, and queen-mother, Anne of Austria had so long played her part as the greatest lady in Europe, that an austere dignity, a self-possessed and severe majesty of bearing, had become her second nature. At three-score years and more, she retained traces of that beauty for which, in her prime of womanhood, she had been as celebrated as for her cunning, her daring, and her iron strength of will. The dark eyes flashed even now with something of the fire that had kindled Mazarin into courage. The stately figure had lost none of the pride that could move serenely through treachery, riot, and rebellion in the wars of the Fronde. Her fresh and delicate complexion showed no more signs of age than of the fatal malady which even then was drawing out her death-warrant. The hand that had signed treaties was still white ; the arm that had swayed a sceptre, mercilessly on occasion, as if it had been a

sword, was still round and beautiful; but long years of sovereignty, the habit of command, had rendered this mature Juno rather a goddess to be worshipped at a respectful distance than a woman to be approached and loved.

With all her perceptions sharpened by fear, Louise took in the situation at a glance—the grey satin draperies on the walls, the wood carvings, the shining floor, the diamond-paned windows closely fastened, the faint odour of patchouli pervading the apartment, the Queen-mother erect and rigid in a high-backed chair, Madame with scowling brow seated by her side, and three or four ladies in waiting standing near the door.

At a sign from her Majesty, these curtsied one by one, and withdrew.

Thus left alone with her judges, the girl's heart began to beat, and her head to swim. Through all her discomfiture, however, there was present a certain subtle sense of humour, of the mirth with which Athénée's mischievous eyes would have regarded the whole transaction, and a firm resolve that, whatever confessions might be forced from her, she would in no way compromise the King. Anne of Austria, measuring her from head to foot with an air of scornful displeasure, accosted the culprit in her iciest tones.

"So here you are, my dear, at last. Have you any idea, young lady, why we sent for you?"

"It's coming now," thought Louise, more dead than alive, but she summoned up courage enough to answer—

"None whatever, madame. I am only waiting your Majesty's orders to obey them."

"Very submissive indeed!" broke in the Duchesse d'Orléans. "We are not to be imposed on, mademoiselle, I can tell you, by these airs of innocence and simplicity. It is horrible; it is disgusting!"

"Submission is never out of place," said the Queen-mother

loftily, "and I am glad to find obedience promised so readily where I had no reason to look for it. This will save a world of trouble, as we need not repeat the same story over and over again. Mademoiselle de la Vallière, what is the matter, child? I must insist that we are not to make a scene!"

Anne of Austria may have recalled for a moment her own reverses and humiliations, may have felt some little twinge of compunction that softened her bearing ever such a little; for the girl's overstrung nerves had given way, and she burst into tears.

Madame was less pitiful. "This affectation serves no purpose," said she. "We are not gentlemen, to be deceived by red eyes and a wet pocket-handkerchief. Keep your tears for the King, mademoiselle: they cannot impose on any one here!"

It was a cruel taunt, but served to brace the victim's courage, while the mention of that dear name, even at such a juncture, modified in some degree its venom and its sting. She took no heed of her enemy, but addressed the Queen-mother firmly and respectfully.

"Excuse me, madame, I have yet to learn my fault, and how I may repair it."

"I am not going to make a *procès-verbal*," replied Anne of Austria, "nor do I choose to enter into an argument with a maid of honour. It is enough for you to know my decision: you can no longer remain at court."

"But, madame!" stammered Louise. "How? Why? What have I said? what have I done?"

"There cannot be two Queens of France," was the cold reply. "I have nothing to add. You will return home at once, under the care of a fitting person. You may go now; but first thank Madame for all her kindness, and accept your dismissal formally from her service."

The Queen-mother rose as if to conclude the interview. Louise looked from one lady to the other, speechless with dismay.

She was not to escape, however, without undergoing a last humiliation. The Duchesse d'Orléans could not forbear a parting blow, even though her enemy was down. As Louise, moved by force of habit, and not knowing where to turn, advanced to kiss her hand, in token of farewell, she waved her away scornfully, and addressed herself to the Queen-mother.

"Let us only get rid of this little viper!" said Madame, "and I can dispense with the rest. I never wish to see nor hear of her again!"

Then the two royal ladies turned their backs on her, and she felt that she was dismissed, degraded, disgraced.

CHAPTER XI.

THE MAN WHO LOVED HER.

LOUISE returned to her own apartments more dead than alive, smarting with shame and anger, conscious of unjust humiliation, and a prey to the most profound despair. It was all over, then! The flower that seemed to blow so hopefully had been blighted before its prime. Soiled, withered, broken, who would care to gather it now? It was hard to have done with hope, to have abjured the future, to have lived out a life, at nineteen!

Where must she go? To whom would they send her, these two merciless women, with their imperious gestures and cold cruel eyes? How could she return, disgraced and dishonoured, to the fond mother who trusted her so implicitly, who believed so firmly in her modesty, her principles, and her pride? How could she face the keen-eyed, choleric uncle, who would reprove her as a churchman, and reproach her as a relative, that she had so failed in her duty to the proud family name of Le Blanc? But perhaps this was not the punishment intended. Anne of Austria spoke of her removal under the care of some fitting person; that person might never conduct her home,—she had heard of such things. Already the Bastille had become a word of fear; already its grim and frowning walls enclosed more than one of those lifelong secrets for which it was hereafter to be celebrated. Her young companions, even now, would tell each other, in frightened

whispers, tales of such mystery and horror relating to that gaol-fortress as curdled their young blood, and made them afraid to look over their shoulders in the dark corridors on their way to bed; how splendid courtiers, beautiful young ladies, returning from ball or banquet, might at any time be accosted by a tall figure in black, booted, belted, plumed, and masked, who would politely usher them into a coach bearing the royal arms, and guarded by an escort of Black Musketeers, also masked; how that coach would be driven swiftly away in a certain direction; and how the splendid courtiers, the beautiful young ladies, would never be seen nor heard of again.

Was she too destined for such a living death, and would the King suffer her to be so buried and so forgotten—*her* Louis, who had sworn he loved her, and in whom she believed as in her own soul? Yes, it must be so; she had doubtless offended him, and he had resolved on her punishment; or, worse still, she had been supplanted in his affections, and a rival had compassed her destruction. Ah! if it were thus, then would she indeed wish to live no longer. Welcome suffering, torture, oblivion! Welcome the Bastille! Welcome the tomb!

Yet even now, sorrow-laden, ashamed, and terror-stricken, she sank into a waking dream, of which the central figure was that royal lover, round whom all her fancies revolved. Reclining in an easy-chair, exhausted by suffering, the tears wet on her cheek, in the hush of evening, in the solitude of her own apartment, she recalled each look, each word, each gesture, of one whom, though he might slay her, she felt constrained to love. She had heard that, when people were about to die, their past came before them with marvellous clearness, and thought her own end must be near, so vividly did she realise a hundred little trifles of her short and happy life—the chestnuts at Château de Blois,

and the King passing under their shade, ere he mounted to pursue the journey that gained him his Spanish bride ; the court at Fontainebleau, and the King moving amongst his nobility like a god ; the Dance of the Seasons in that theatre by the lake, and the King outshining his companions, bright and beautiful as day ; the chase in the forest, a summer sun glinting among the leaves, a blue sky overhead, a cavalcade blazing with gold, and the King on a white horse ; the thunder-storm, the sheltering beech, and the King ; the evening drives, the entertainment at Vaux, the costly bracelet, and the King, and the King, and the King ; lastly, the covert glances, the low whispers, the stolen interviews, so dear, so dangerous, and the loving secret kept so carefully between herself and the King.

Then she awoke to a sense of the loneliness, the misery, of her position. If he deserted her, where had she a friend left ? And yet it seemed impossible he could be so perfidious, so hard of heart ! Surely he would feel some remorse if he knew how she suffered ; surely he would come to the rescue if he could see her now. Oh for one glance of those fond blue eyes, one word in that low, deep, tender voice ! She would throw herself into his arms then and there, bidding him take her away, to do with her what he would.

The apartments of Mademoiselle de la Vallière, in the same wing with those of Madame, looked into a quadrangle of the court. A balcony, supported by iron pillars wrought into many fantastic devices of crowns and fleur-de-lys, ran outside her windows. It seemed quite possible, though it required considerable activity, for an expert climber to attain this balcony, and look into her very chamber. Nevertheless, her consternation was extreme when, turning in her chair, she observed, through the open casement, that a man's figure stood there, erect and motionless, the outline of his

arms, head, and shoulders brought into relief against the fast-fading twilight of an evening sky.

For one moment fear was in the ascendant, and with difficulty she repressed a scream, while an image of the coach, the musketeers, and the gloomy gateway of the Bastille flashed across her brain. In the next, love gained the mastery, and murmuring, "It is thyself, then, my king! my own!" she rushed to meet him, with fond arms extended, and her heart flying in welcome to her lips.

"You are disappointed, mademoiselle, and I am the cause," said a deep reproachful voice, as she stopped short with open mouth and fixed eyes, erect and rigid, like a woman turned to stone. "Oh, Louise, Louise! it is all too true, then, and my punishment is greater than I can bear."

While he spoke De Bragelone passed through the window and stood before her, stern, pale, and haggard, looking exceedingly unlike an enterprising gallant who had scaled the bower of his ladye-love.

She recovered herself in a breath, none the less demurely, perhaps, for her disappointment.

"Your visit, monsieur, is unexpected," she said; "pardon me if I add unprecedented, both for the time and manner in which you have chosen to intrude on my solitude. But I am friendless now, and disgraced. Any one may insult me with impunity."

Then she burst into tears, hiding her face in her hands.

He felt sorely agitated and perplexed; this was so different from what he expected—a line of defence so completely out of character with the attack. Coldness, surprise, reproaches, he anticipated; but a burst of grief like this unmanned and put him to confusion in its very helplessness.

"Louise, Louise," said he, gently taking her hands, "you are in trouble, in distress. Is it possible that I can be

so unwelcome—I who would die to serve you—who am the oldest and truest of your friends ? ”

“ An old friend, monsieur,” she returned with spirit, “ is always welcome ; but he should come in at the door.”

“ And a new lover at the window,” he returned bitterly. “ I understand you, mademoiselle ; and yet, oh ! Louise, is it too late ? Even if your happiness is gone, can we not save your future—your honour, your good name ? ”

“ By what right do you speak to me in such a tone, Monsieur le Marquis ? ”

“ By the right of truth ; by the right of compassion ; by the right of unswerving constancy and undying love. Have you forgotten the little lame girl at Blois, and the boy who asked no better than to spend every minute of his holiday by the couch on which she lay ? At least when we were children, Louise, we loved each other dearly.”

“ I know I was horribly scolded on your account. I know I ought never to have read one of your schoolboy letters. Heavens ! I laugh when I think of them, in writing half an inch long ! The only unkind words my mother ever spoke to me were about you. Enough ! you compromised me even then, Monsieur le Marquis, and see how you would compromise me now ! ”

Her tone was softened, and in the kind blue eyes there lurked a sparkle of mirth, not wholly quenched by tears.

“ Nay, mademoiselle,” he returned, “ do not say so, do not think so for an instant. Had I come to your apartments openly at noonday, a thousand tongues would have chattered freely to your disparagement, and to-morrow Madame herself might have put you to shame before the whole court. But no one has seen me at the door, in the passages, on the staircase ; and malice herself would protest I could not have visited you to-night.”

"In good truth, monsieur, I am at a loss to comprehend how you found yourself on the balcony without wings."

He smiled sadly. "I am the only man at court," said he, "who would not answer you with some jargon about Venus and Cupid and the wings of Love. I cannot prate nor turn fine phrases to-night, for my heart is heavy within me."

"That makes your ascent the more remarkable."

"You can jest, Louise. All the better; you were in no jesting mood when I came in. No; the affair is quite simple. My own regiment is on guard. I posted the sentry twenty paces farther off your windows than usual, and not a living creature knows I am here but yourself."

"I dare say your men are well used to such changes, and take little notice of these clamberings in the dark of their colonel?"

She felt some strong appeal was coming, some outburst of passion or reproach, and was woman enough to put the awful moment off as long as possible.

They were standing by the window when he entered; there was no light in the room, and the flush of sunset had already faded into darkness, but she could see that his eyes were troubled, and his face was very pale.

"It is no question of my men, nor of their officers," was his answer. "I arrived here at great risk, and with much difficulty. You may imagine I did not come for nothing. Louise, were it possible for the dead to rise, I believe the motive that brought me to-night would have drawn me out of my grave. Pardon! I cannot command myself where I feel so strongly. I desire to be calm, polite, reasonable. Mademoiselle, will you hear me?"

"Monsieur, I have no choice."

"Then pay attention, and do not think that I am here only to heap on you the reproaches of a discarded lover. No; I am too well aware that, far more than the absent, the

unsuccessful are always in the wrong. I come to warn you of the gulf yawning at your feet, of the precipice over which the next step will hurl you in a fall that can never permit you to rise again."

"You are eloquent, monsieur, but you are also unintelligible. Excuse me if I engage you to speak no more in parables, but tell me in the name of common sense what you mean."

"The King loves you, Louise. There, the word is launched; and *you*—you love the King!"

She blushed scarlet. Covered with shame, she had no resource but to affect a greater anger than she felt.

"How dare you say so?" she exclaimed. "How dare you couple his Majesty's name with mine? Again I ask by what right you address such language to *me*?"

"And again I answer, by the right of a love that shrinks from no sacrifice on your behalf. There is but one chance left to preserve your future welfare, and the spotless honour of the Le Blancs. You must take refuge in flight—now, this very night, at once and for ever. Do not interrupt me. Have a moment's patience, and hear me out. Mademoiselle de la Vallière, you do not love me; perhaps, though it is hard to think it, you never *did* love me. Yet here I offer you my hand, my station, and the safeguard of my name. I ask for nothing in return but that you should immediately leave the court under my mother's protection. The greatest power in France cannot molest the Marquise de Bragelone, and I shall know how to silence the sharpest tongue that presumes to make its comments on my wife. Let me but place you in safety, Louise, remove you from these snares of perdition to a home of your own, to an honourable station, and I pledge you the word of a gentleman and a soldier I will never even ask to see or speak to you again."

His voice shook, but, looking in the brave and resolute

face, she could not doubt he meant sincerely what he said.

"Oh, De Bragelone, you *do* love me!" she murmured. "I owe it to such unselfishness, such devotion, as yours, to tell you the truth."

He winced as if he had been struck with a knife, and his hand stole unconsciously to his sword.

"Do not look so piteous, so reproachful," she continued. "I have followed the dictates of my own heart. Whatever others may think of me, I do not regret. I would not retrace any one step I have taken from the first. I love him, I tell you, I worship him; not with the loyalty of a subject for a king, but as a woman loves and worships the one man to whom she has given her heart. Ah! my poor Bragelone, I too know what suffering is. Believe that I am full of pity for yours. Yes; I love him. I would give my life that he were a simple marquis, a peer of France. What do I say?—a humble peasant in a blouse, digging for his bread. I would dig by his side, and we should be happy. But no; it is not to be. And now I shall never see him again; never again! I talked of pitying *you*, monsieur; in truth, I have no pity to spare from myself!"

His dark, stern face had undergone many changes during the girl's avowal of an attachment that removed her so far out of reach, but it brightened enough now to show that he still cherished some lingering spark of hope.

"How, never again?" he asked. "What has happened? What has come between you? Speak, Louise; do not keep me on the rack!"

"Have you not heard?" she replied. "Do you not know? I am dismissed from the court; I am to leave the palace to-morrow. I have been slandered, insulted, outraged. What shall I do? what shall I do?"

Again she burst into tears, weeping hysterically, passionately, in sorrow and in anger too.

"My sword," he began ; but she interrupted him, sobbing violently.

"Keep it in the sheath, monsieur ; the days of knight-errantry have gone by. Bayard and Duguesclin are in paradise. Besides, you could not draw on the Queen-mother and Madame. Believe me, dear Bragelone, there is no more to be said. Adieu, my friend ! I shall always wish you well. You have a noble heart."

"And you will not accept it, even now, when I lay it before you to be trodden under foot?"

He often thought afterwards that her face was like the face of an angel while she looked on him so pitifully with her sad, sweet smile.

"Not even now," she answered. "I know its value too well, and reproach myself that I have nothing to offer in exchange. Do not be unhappy on my account, dear friend. I have nothing left in this world ; but it may be that my desolation will drive me to seek comfort from the other. Come what may, I shall remember you always in my thoughts, in my prayers. But we had better meet no more. Farewell, good and true friend, farewell!"

In vain he urged, pleaded, expostulated. She remained inexorable, answering his prayers with silence, and confuting his arguments with tears. The hour, too, was approaching at which his sentries must be relieved, and it behoved him to return by the way he came without delay. He lingered one moment at the window for a last, long look on the pale face he loved so well ; then, passing softly across the balcony, descended the iron pillar that sustained it, light and agile of limb, indeed, but heavy of heart, mourning as one who comes from the presence of the dead.

The honest soldier on watch, a pistol-shot off, who thought

his colonel the happiest and greatest man on earth, except the King, would have desired to change places with him less earnestly, could he have contrasted the misgivings that racked the brain, the anguish that tore the heart, of his officer, with his own drowsy and somewhat material meditations, turning on sausage, wine, tobacco, arrears of pay, and the smiles of a young person living near the barracks that he could command at the shortest notice.

We cannot all be colonels and generals; it is well that so many of us are content and comfortable in the ranks.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MAN SHE LOVED.

WITHIN the shadow of the palace it was almost dark. De Bragelone, slipping deftly from the balcony, had reason to flatter himself that his indiscreet visit to one of Madame's maids of honour was unobserved by any loiterer about the court. Nothing but the urgency of the case would have induced him so to imperil her good name, for the affair was undertaken at considerable risk of detection. Besides sentries of his own regiment, on whom he could rely, and who were posted at every entrance to the building, corridors and passages were lined with Swiss, whose functions seemed less military than domestic, who were armed to the teeth, yet crept stealthily about, with velvet footfall, and who presented the remarkable anomaly of heroic soldiers converted into busy and unscrupulous spies.

Already the young King had contracted a passion for acquainting himself with the private affairs of his subjects, and exacted minute reports on the sayings and doings, the loves and likings, the daily habits, even the household expenditure, of every one with whom he came in contact. It is but justice to insist that Louis scorned to abuse the ascendancy so unworthily obtained, and that a secret, of however compromising a nature, intrusted to his honour was safe never to be divulged.

Still, under such a system a man could hardly hope to conceal his lightest action from publicity, and it is only

surprising that intrigue of any kind should have been carried on without provoking notice. People *did* manage, perhaps, even at such disadvantage, to hide matters they were ashamed to own; but, as is usually the case, the lightest offences against propriety were those which created most remark, and brought down the heaviest punishment on a culprit. In all ages the verdict of society has been much the same as when the Latin poet deplored that crows, however black, found excuse, while censure vexed the spotless bosom of the dove.

Even as the Marquis set foot to ground, a man in a cloak, with his hat drawn over his brows, gliding like a phantom from an angle in the wall, tapped him rudely on the shoulder, bidding him, in a thick hoarse whisper—

“Follow, as you are a gentleman; one hundred paces, and no more. In the name of the King!”

Purposely disguised, or altered by agitation, there was yet something familiar in the voice; but the figure retreated so swiftly that De Bragelone had no time for reflection, and obeyed, as it were, by instinct. He found himself in a few seconds on a terrace outside the building, face to face with this mysterious companion, whose whole frame shook with emotion, obviously more akin to wrath than fear.

A broad moon rose over the level of the distant forest, that seemed only separated by a low balustrade from the elevated lawn on which they stood. There was already light enough to distinguish the stone carvings with their fleur-de-lys, and even the shrubs that glistened on another terrace beyond and below; but the windows on this side the palace were closed, and the place seemed well adapted for an interview that had better not be overlooked.

The figure halted, turned short round on De Bragelone, threw open its cloak, shook its fist in his face, and exclaimed, in accents of rage that vibrated between a whisper and a scream—

"I know all! I have seen all! You shall do me reason, monsieur, here on the spot, man to man, were I ten times a king! You need not prevaricate, Monsieur le Marquis; you need not lie. I will have your blood!—I will, by all the saints in heaven and all the devils in hell!"

The voice seemed familiar enough now, and the face, and the figure. It was Louis himself—livid, bristling, his eyes blazing, his nostrils spread, every feature working with uncontrollable fury.

His sword was out like lightning. Nothing but a cool and lofty courage, partly, perhaps, the result of an aching heart, saved De Bragelone's life.

"It were too much honour," said he, "to cross swords with my sovereign. If I have offended him past forgiveness, I have lived long enough. Lunge, sire, and let us finish with it once for all!"

Standing erect and undaunted, he threw open his justaucorps, and advanced his bare chest as if to invite a death-thrust.

"On guard, monsieur!" hissed the King, stamping the one, two, of a practised fencer on the turf, and drawing back his elbow in act to strike.

"Lunge then, sire, I beg of you!" was the calm and dignified reply.

Louis flourished his sword above his head, and threw it with all his force over the balustrade. The wicked blade flickered in the moonlight ere it fell to break in two on the terrace below.

"I cannot be a murderer," said the King; "I cannot run a man through the body who offers no resistance. Yet, by St. Louis! I would not answer for it if I remained another moment sword in hand. Monsieur le Marquis de Bragelone, resign your charge to your second in command. Now, monsieur—this very instant!"

"But, sire——"

"Silence, monsieur: I will not hear a word. You would lie to me, as doubtless you have lied to the abandoned girl whose apartment you so lately quitted."

The insult, still more the allusion, stung him to the quick.

"You have called me a liar, sire," he replied with emotion, "twice in the last five minutes. I am a peer of France, and my hands are tied: the disgrace does not rest with *me*."

"Enough!" answered Louis haughtily. "There can be no discussion between us on such points. I trust, monsieur," added the King with a sneer, "that you bade the young lady a polite farewell; for, as I am a living man, you shall never set eyes on her face again!"

"I do not ask it, sire. I ask nothing for myself—nothing. Punish me—put me to death—send me to the Bastille; but do no injustice to that young girl by thought or deed. Spare her, sire,—on my knees I implore you, spare her! It is your duty. Are you not her king?"

There was no mistaking the man's earnestness. He knelt at his sovereign's feet in slavish, abject submission—he who had stood upright so dauntlessly a moment before, to accept his death-wound.

"You love her, then; you own it?" said Louis, in a voice that was still hoarse with rage.

"So dearly, sire," was the answer, "that I ask no better than to perish, here at your Majesty's feet, for her sake."

"It is too much!" broke out the King, "and, by Heaven, any other sovereign in Europe would have had your head for your audacity. I am not in the habit of repeating my commands. Withdraw to your quarters at once, Monsieur le Marquis. Consider yourself under close arrest. To-morrow I shall have resolved on the course that is most consistent with my own dignity; but do not persuade yourself, for an

instant, that I shall either forgive or forget. Not another word ! Rise, monsieur : this interview has lasted long enough ;” and with a cold bow, the more cruel for its severe and dignified politeness, Louis wrapped himself in his cloak, pulled his hat over his brows, and returned to the palace, leaving De Bragelone utterly confounded and dismayed.

Of his own ruin the Marquis felt assured. This consideration affected him but little, compared with the uncertainty of her fate whom he loved so dearly, and whose honour he had tried so hard to save, even at the risk of her good name. Yet perhaps he was not more disturbed than the King. Fickle as one might naturally become, whose heart every lady in France was fain to captivate, there could be no doubt that at this moment Louis loved the young maid of honour with a true, an ardent, and, so far as his nature admitted, an unselfish love. Her beauty, her sweetness, her guileless simplicity, and her entire devotion had obtained complete mastery over his affections, and it is not too much to say that, had he been free, he would joyfully have made her Queen of France.

In such a disposition as his, love could not exist without an unusual leavening of jealousy. Ever since he could remember, even amongst the hardships to which his infancy was subjected, he had always been the first object of consideration to those about him. It may be said of Louis that he was a born king from his cradle, and he certainly possessed the tendency, that royalty necessarily acquires, to constitute himself the centre round which everything else must revolve. When the lion has laid his paw on a bone, he suffers no other beast to approach it : when a king has set his desires on an object, woe to those who cross his path ! Rivalry seems so improbable, that it may be a long time before his suspicions are aroused ; but for that very reason

the flame, once kindled, rages with a fierceness, as with a power of destruction, unknown to meaner men. De Bragelone went his way in sorrow and humiliation; but the sovereign who condemned him returned to the palace beside himself with rage, mortification, and surprise.

In so wild a mood, he had no consideration for the proprieties, scarcely the decencies of life; yet such is the force of habit, he could not entirely shake off the trammels of etiquette. He would not have hesitated to force himself into the apartments of Mademoiselle de la Vallière, reproach her perfidy, and leave her pitilessly to the disgrace his visit would necessarily entail. It was from no scruples of honour or delicacy that he refrained from such an outrage. No, there was a power stronger than these that set in motion the whole court machine. It was impossible for the King of France to enter an apartment without being announced, and while he ran over in his mind those of his lords who were best qualified for the difficult task of ushering their master into the presence of a lady with whom he had resolved to break for ever, the hour arrived at which it was his custom to hold, in the grand saloon, a gathering of his courtiers, called an "appartement," for the purpose of playing lansquenet and other games at cards till supper-time.

He had never felt so miserable in his life as while his people dressed him for this ceremony. When, at last, his hat was handed by the first valet to the Master of the Horse, to be passed to the Grand Chamberlain, who offered it to his Majesty, these high officials did not fail to note their master's agitation, and exchanged glances of dismay to observe the handsome young face so careworn and depressed.

Louis and Louise, the lover and his love, both suffered acutely. The one cursed, the other deplored, those rules of

ceremony which compelled each to appear in public with however sore a heart. As usual when they carry a sorrow between them, the woman felt, and the man displayed, it most.

Mademoiselle de la Vallière had as yet received no such formal dismissal from the service of Madame as would entitle her to absent herself from the regular duties of attendance. Perhaps she never looked more beautiful, certainly she never felt so unhappy, as when she entered the grand saloon, with the other maids of honour, in the train of her imperious mistress. The soft blue eyes were only deeper and darker for the tears they had shed. Sorrow and suffering had brought a pale pink flush to the delicate cheek, and something of self-assertion against injustice imparted to her demeanour that modest dignity which so became her supple figure and graceful ease of step.

Count de Guiches, unremitting in his attentions to Madame, felt a pang within his lace-embroidered bosom sharp enough to remind him that he had a heart.

As she took her place at the card-table, her eyes met the King's, and she turned deadly pale. His looks wandered over her vaguely, abstractedly, without the least sign of recognition; yet he did not fail to observe that she wore his gift—the bracelet won in the lottery—on her arm.

Scores of eyes leered and languished; scores of tongues laughed, chattered, flirted; white fingers covered with jewels handled the cards, and gathered in the gold; white shoulders, not entirely uncovered with paint, were raised and shrugged at every turn of the game; laugh and jest and pleasant repartee flew lightly from lip to lip, while in the distant galleries Lulli and his violins completed the enchantment of the scene. All was mirth, pleasure, gaiety; and yet here were two hearts concealing their torment of fire in the

midst of this apparent Paradise. The man was suffering : of course it was necessary that the woman should suffer still more. She felt sure now she had offended him, and racked her brain to think how ; yet, reflecting on her interview with the Queen-mother, and combining it with the King's intentional neglect, she had no doubt that her removal from court was decided on with his approval, and that her ruin was complete.

No wonder spades and diamonds danced before her eyes in undistinguished motley, while she lost her modest stakes without counting or caring for the cost. She was conscious of but one wish in the world—a longing for rest, an ardent desire to go home and lie down and die.

But the torture was not yet to cease. There came a shuffling of feet, a raising of voices, the game was over, and the company rose to go. Louis placed himself where she could not but pass before him as, with Athénée and two or three of her companions, she followed Madame from the room.

How cruel it was to bow so low, so formally, just as he bowed for the others, and to ask in that cold, constrained voice—

“Has not Mademoiselle de la Vallière been more fortunate than usual to-night?”

She shook all over, and could hardly murmur, “Indeed, no, sire ; I have lost everything !”

“Mademoiselle is an artful player,” he rejoined with cutting emphasis, “but she has no right to complain of bad luck when she chooses to discard the king for the knave.”

Innocent of his meaning, the taunt fell harmless ; but she shrank from the harsh looks, the unkind tone, as a woman would shrink and shiver under the lash.

“And you say you have lost, mademoiselle,” continued

her pitiless lover. "That is unfortunate, for you risk very heavy stakes. Better luck next time, perhaps. A house of cards is easily built up again, but there are some losses that can never be repaired."

The ship seemed sinking under her feet. In another moment she must pass on, and it would be all over. Summoning her courage for a last appeal, she raised her beautiful eyes to his face with an imploring, yearning look that went to his heart.

"I shall never have another chance," she said. "I have received my dismissal, and am ordered to leave your Majesty's court."

"I wish you a pleasant journey, mademoiselle," he answered, with a bow that signified the interview was over, and she must move on.

But for Athénée de Mortemar, who stood at her elbow, prepared, as usual, for every emergency, Louise must have sunk fainting to the floor. There is amongst women, at least, so much *esprit de corps*, that, however freely they may express their opinions in private, they combine in public, readily enough, to shield one of their own sex who betrays her weakness from the common enemy. Audacious as they are in attack, perhaps their fighting qualities are best displayed by the dexterity with which they cover a retreat, carry off their wounded, and bury their dead. Athénée shot a reproachful glance in the King's very face, who, through all his vexation, could not help remarking that she had fine eyes, and supported her friend from the room so judiciously, with such tact and courage, that none but herself, and perhaps one other, knew how terrible was the ordeal the poor girl had gone through, nor how woefully she had failed under the trial.

Louis indeed appreciated by his own punishment the cruelty of that he inflicted on her he loved so dearly still.

It is hard to say which suffered most—the woman, dismayed, disheartened, stupefied, or the man who, the moment she had left his presence, knew he could not live without her, and to whose other torments were added keen pangs of shame, compunction, and self-reproach.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN THE NARROW WAY.

"It is finished and done with now, Athénée. In all my life I shall never see him again!" Louise spoke, in a storm of sobs, with arms wound about her friend's neck, and a tearful face hid in her bosom.

Athénée did by no means view matters in so hopeless a light. To her, life and its affections had hitherto seemed but as the game of lansquenet, which she so much affected, and played with such audacity. Luck was everything; and did not change constitute the very nature of luck? If one held bad cards now, the next deal was all the likelier to afford a winning hand. As for wounds of the heart, bah! she scattered them right and left: having no pity for those she inflicted, perhaps she underrated their pain.

"Nothing *is* ever done with, my dear," she answered. "Life would be so much pleasanter if things could come to an end at once, when they grow tiresome. And then people tell you this is a world of change."

"I would have asked for no change," said the other. "Only yesterday I was so happy—so happy; and now, Athénée, I wish I was dead."

"Why so? Look at *me*, dear: I am not down-hearted, and my case is far worse; I am going to be married!"

"But you love him, Athénée, surely. Oh, if you do not, I pity you from my heart!"

"Pity him, my dear, not me. No, Louise, I do *not* love

him, nor do I quite understand that love about which people make such phrases. You have experienced it, you say, and see how miserable it renders you. There is a great sameness in such affairs. One man pleases more than another; that is all!"

"At least, Athénée, you are a true friend. If Monsieur de Montespan can depend on you as I do, he will have no reason to complain. And I shall not even see you married! Athénée, it breaks my heart: I must wish you good-bye for ever—now, in five minutes, when I say good night."

The two girls were in the bedchamber of Louise, where Mademoiselle de Mortemar, true to the maxim that "one loves what one protects," had accompanied her sorrowing companion.

The stronger nature, pitying while it despised the weaker, would have felt and shown more compassion, had not Athénée's knowledge of life taught her that such a tie as existed between the King and the maid of honour could only be undone by patience and dexterity, not severed at a blow. Once, twice, she traversed the floor in deep thought, then returned to her seat by the other.

"What will you wager," she asked cheerfully, "that, in spite of all, you and I are not sitting comfortably, to-morrow night, side by side in this very room?"

"I have nothing left to risk," answered Louise with a sigh. "No, Athénée, my mind is made up: at daybreak I leave the palace for ever. I fly to a convent; I implore to be admitted; and all the rest of my life shall be passed in praying for those I loved so fondly here."

Mademoiselle de Mortemar raised her eyebrows in unfeigned surprise. "And our faithful shepherd?" said she—"our royal admirer who looks at us so tenderly when we make our curtsy in the great saloon—is he to count for nothing in our intentions? It is no pleasant prospect for the

convent. Faith, he is the very man to waste it with fire and sword, like that fat King of England we used to read of, who got so tired of his wives—which was excusable if they resembled Madame—and cut their heads off, which was infamous and atrocious under any circumstances !”

“He will never come to look for me,” moaned the other ; “he has given me up, and there is an end of my love, and my life and all !”

“Nonsense ! At least leave him a message, a farewell, a keepsake.”

“Do you think he would care to have one ? Athénée, you are wise, you are brave ; I will take your advice. See this bracelet ! He gave me this before them all ; the only gift of his that I possess ; he shall have it back ; then he will know everything is at an end between us, and perhaps—perhaps he will wish he had not been so unkind.”

“Make it into a packet : I promise to place it myself in his hands. Oh ! I care very little what people say ; I am afraid of nobody. Even Madame is sparing of her frowns when she looks my way. Rely on me, my dear, and consider the thing done.”

So, with faithful pledges on one side, with many professions of gratitude and attachment on the other, Louise put in her friend’s hands a little sealed packet, to be delivered next morning to the King ; and, having so far unburdened her mind, burst into tears once more, and proffered a last embrace.

“Farewell, Athénée ! Think now and then of your poor Louise.”

“Farewell, Louise ! Nonsense, you foolish child ; it is not farewell : I shall soon see you again.”

So Mademoiselle de Mortemar retired to her own apartment, where no doubt she slept soundly, while Louise tossed on her bed, feverish and wakeful, counting the hours till

dawn began to widen, and the Swiss moved about in the corridors and passages, while the sentries of De Bragelone's regiment were relieved in the court below. Then she rose, packed a small bundle, and stole out of the palace, along the same terrace on which an encounter took place so lately, between the man who loved her and the man she loved.

It was a bright calm morning in early autumn; the leaf hardly stirred on the tree, and only in deep and distant masses did the dark verdure of the forest seem already to be tipped with gold; the sky, serene and blue, was flecked with streaks of cloud, white, delicate, like lace. A bird winged its silent way above; a sheep-bell tinkled below; from cottage chimneys, thin, grey, spiral smoke stole slowly upward; and the voices of children babbled pleasantly on the ear. It was a scene of peace, repose, contentment; cruel to the desolate and the outcast, because so suggestive of happiness and home.

Louise, a wanderer for the first time, felt acutely all its associations. Till she emerged from the palace her energies had been taxed to escape observation; but, once on the high-road, she found leisure to look about, and to realise the importance of the step she had taken. Nothing, she was determined, should come between her and the object she had in view; but it seemed very dispiriting, very forlorn, to be trudging along that paved causeway under the poplars, with no better companion than an outraged and aching heart. Presently she overtook an old peasant woman in blue serge and wooden shoes, toil-worn, ragged, but wearing gold earrings and a clean white cap.

"Good dame," said she, "am I in the right road for St. Mary's?"

"Madame—a thousand pardons! *Mademoiselle* seeks the convent, no doubt." Here she crossed herself. "It is a little quarter of a league off,—no more: I pass the gate myself."

"May I walk with you, then? Every road seems lonely to a woman without a companion."

"Better solitude than bad company, mademoiselle; better an empty house than a troublesome lodger, an empty larder than a loaded stomach, and an empty pocket than a discontented mind."

Louise took the hint, and thrust a crown into the old woman's hand.

"Do me the favour to accept it for your little ones at home," she said with her sweet smile. "It is not much, but it is given for good-will."

"May the saints repay you a hundred-fold, beautiful lady!" returned the other. "I have indeed begun the day with their blessing."

"And I too, perhaps," murmured Louise. But they had now arrived in the vicinity of the convent, and parted with many expressions of kindness on both sides.

The narrow way is toilsome and rugged at first; it lacks the smooth and easy pavement, the pleasant incline, of that down-hill road we are all so willing to travel, and, till we have accustomed ourselves to mount upwards, the ascent seems so steep that we must cast away all our superfluities of vanity, luxury, and self-indulgence, to attain the height from which our eyes are to be gladdened with a glimpse of the promised land. Louise shrank from the forbidding walls, the grave and gloomy associations that surrounded the Convent of the Sisters of St. Mary at Chaillot. More than once she was fain to turn back, between the wicket that admitted her and the bare clean parlour to which she was ushered by a grim and silent Sister who answered her summons at the door.

"Can I see the Mother Superior?"

"Impossible; she is in retreat."

"One of the Sisters?"

"They are in the chapel."

"For the love of Heaven do not drive me away. Say that a person seeks refuge with them, who has suffered sore affliction; that a sinner entreats their prayers, and implores admittance to their order."

"Enough! you must wait—some hours, perhaps: what do I know? There is a wooden bench: you can sit down."

But the poor weary heart could bear no more. The gentle frame, exhausted with anxiety and watching, weak for want of nourishment, and spent with unaccustomed fatigue, failed under the pressure. After an interval of delirium, how long or how short she never knew, during which hideous phantoms seemed to cross and jostle in an incongruous maze, unconsciousness came to her relief, and, gliding from the bench to the floor, Louise lost her senses and fainted away.

Mademoiselle de Mortemar was a woman of her word. Had she known her friend's untoward plight, she could not have been more resolved to reinstate her in a position that, for reasons of her own, she wished her at present to retain.

It was the privilege of a court lady to require a private interview with the King, if she so pleased, on his way to or from the council of his ministers. The audience was to last exactly five minutes, and to take place in view of the whole circle, though out of ear-shot.

"Five minutes!" thought Athénée, while she dressed herself even more carefully than usual. "If I cannot turn any man round my finger in five seconds, I had better retire to the country at once, and believe no longer in anything, —not even in my dressmaker."

With scarcely more embarrassment than she would have felt in ordering a fresh costume from the last-named personage, Mademoiselle de Mortemar singled herself out from a bevy of ladies on the sunny terrace by which his Majesty passed from the Queen's apartments to the council-chamber,

and smiled haughtily, even satirically, to mark how the crowd fell back, and left her in the midst, a prominent and beautiful object on which even the fastidious eye of royalty could not but rest with satisfaction.

She had never looked better in her life, and she knew it. Even her own sex could find nothing to condemn but the boldness of her air, and admitted, though unwillingly, that the young lady walked with a graceful bearing, and was really well dressed. •

She cared little that the moment was ill chosen; that Louis was vexed and irritated by such unwelcome news as caused him to call his advisers together, less to solicit their counsel than to impart his own will.

The King had been slighted in the person of his ambassador. The right of France to take precedence of Spain had been questioned at a foreign court. Swords had been drawn, an unseemly brawl had taken place, and Louis, to whom such matters were as the breath of his nostrils, proclaimed in public that, if redress were not forthcoming, he would declare war against the offending power, and march an army at once across the Spanish frontier.

“Does my father-in-law expect that I will wait to resent an insult till my moustache is as long as his own?” said the indignant young monarch; and his courtiers, with admiring glances, whispered each other what a hero he was!

Observing Mademoiselle de Mortemar standing out from the rest, he smothered his impatience, and uncovered with his usual politeness while she approached.

“You are welcome, mademoiselle,” said the King. “I regret I have no time to waste in compliments with so fair a young lady. The moments are precious at this hour of the day. Excuse me for asking at once in what manner I can serve you?”

The expression of his eyes wandering over her rare beauty

of face and form belied the assertion on his lips. He seemed in no hurry to curtail the interview; therefore did Athénée, a skilled and practised coquette, show no desire to prolong it.

"I have a packet here to place in your Majesty's own hands," said she. "In so doing I fulfil the last wish of a dear friend—Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

His face turned grey, as if he had received a mortal wound.

"How the last wish?" he stammered. "What does it mean? Louise is not dead?"

Scorn and anger flashed in her eyes, while she answered pointedly, "Dead to the world, to me, to your Majesty. That poor Louise fled this morning to a convent."

The King was fearfully agitated. "A convent!" he repeated. "Where? when? She cannot be far off. They dare not keep her from me. I will take her from the very altar."

Then he crossed himself, and seemed to mutter some formula of atonement for the threat. Athénée could smooth her brows at will. The dark eyes sparkled with merriment, and there was a cheerful ring in her voice that seemed to put new life into his heart, while she replied—

"That poor Louise! She would ask for nothing better. It is but a half-hour's ride to the Convent of St. Mary; and a broken heart is soon mended, when the workman has had so much practice both in fractures and repairs."

The saucy glance that met his own was very fascinating. Louis felt more in love than ever with Mademoiselle de la Vallière to think she had so charming a friend. It flattered his vanity, too, that an unkind word from him should have driven a woman to such utter despair. His face had grown quite bright and cheerful, ere he closed the interview with warm expression of gratitude and good-will.

"You have done me a great service, mademoiselle," he concluded. "How can I oblige you in return?"

“By permitting me to do your Majesty another on the first opportunity,” was the well-chosen reply, as with the deepest and most respectful of curtsies Mademoiselle de Mortemar sailed back to her place in the court circle.

The council was soon dismissed. The white horse was put to speed; and, when Louise came to herself in the convent parlour, she found her royal lover kneeling at her feet, pressing her hands to his eyes, his lips, his forehead, and bathing them with his tears.

Mutual pardon, mutual assurances, mutual transports. The explanation was full, the reconciliation complete; and Louise had made one step forward, and two back, on the narrow way.



Vincent Brown Day & Son. Lith.



BOOK THE SECOND.

THE DUCHESSE DE VAUJOUR.

CHAPTER I.

ON THE BROAD ROAD.

“Do you remember when I gave you the bracelet before them all? How angry they were, my child, and how frightened you looked!”

“Do I remember? Ah, sire! have I ever forgotten anything you did or said? Do I not know every turn of your face? treasure each look and word of yours in my heart? I watch you as a mother watches her child, or a dog its master!”

“You *do* love me, I am convinced.”

“That is not the question, sire. How can I help it? But sometimes the child forsakes its parent, and the master forgets his dog.”

“Have I deserved that reproach? Are you not satisfied? Louise, are you not happy?”

She took the King's hand, and pressed it to her bosom.

“It is not that,” she replied, looking fondly in his face. “But when one possesses a diamond, the most precious in the world, is it wonderful that one should fear to lose it? You have given me everything—everything—carriages, servants, a palace, pictures, plate. Do you think I value these for themselves? No, but because they are your gifts. Therefore I prize them so highly; but I count them as a pinch of dust

compared with one gentle word, one kindly thought, from my king."

"And yet our orders have been carried out fairly enough," answered Louis, looking on the magnificence that surrounded him with no little satisfaction. "You never will tell me what you want, Louise, but I have managed to make a pretty good guess. Established here with your own retinue, your own household, responsible to nobody, mistress of all, are you not a little queen?"

"Of Ivetot! yes: say, rather, of Fairy-land."

"I wish you to be honoured and regarded as a queen, not in Ivetot, not in a child's fairy tale, but in France. I do not choose—I say, I do not *choose* that the woman I love should yield precedence to any creature under heaven, except the blood royal, of course. I will not see my beautiful Louise standing till she is weary amongst the crowd. Look! there is your Duchess's patent. I give it with my own hands—take it. This means a tabouret; this entitles you to sit down in presence of the Queen herself!"

With a gravity that sufficiently denoted how he appreciated the value of such a privilege, Louis drew from his pocket a large sealed packet, carried at no small inconvenience, which, when unrolled, proved to be neither more nor less than a formal document, setting forth in legal language a deed of gift by his Majesty to his dear, well-beloved, and faithful Louise Françoise de la Baume le Blanc de la Vallière, of the estates of Vaujour in Touraine, and the barony of St. Christopher in Anjou, with the title of Duchess, and all privileges thereto appertaining, in consideration that the said dear and well-beloved Louise was descended from a noble and ancient house, and that her ancestors had shown on many occasions signal instances of their zeal for the good of the State, of their valour and experience in the command of armies. Wherefore, by these presents, it was directed and

ordained, &c., &c.,—all of which the King read aloud with considerable emphasis, placing the whole in his companion's hands, while he bowed low and requested permission to salute by her proper titles Madame la Duchesse de Vaujour, and to congratulate her on her lately acquired rank.

The tears rose to her eyes. "It is too much," said she. "Ah, sire! take back some of your gifts: they are far more than I deserve, than I desire. This hotel, these jewels, all this magnificence, and now vast estates with the highest rank! How can I thank you? I cannot, I cannot; and yet I wish, I wish——"

"What do you wish, Louise? Speak, and it shall be done. There is nothing I cannot give you; nothing a subject ought to desire that I *will* not give you. He who admits the word *impossible* is only half a king!"

"Yet mine is an impossible wish, sire, and a selfish one too. It is that you were a poor peasant, and I might work for you day and night. Then I could prove I loved you for yourself alone."

"Would you like me in a blouse, Louise? Don't you think I look better in a justaucorps?"

"You could never be more beautiful than you are now. You must always be a king, in a blouse or on a throne. But, for me, I am happiest in the shade. This high rank is but a mark for hatred, and I do so dread making enemies. It is a terror that haunts me day and night."

"But why?"

"For fear they should take you from me. Oh, sire, if you knew how foolish I am! I have such misgivings, such forebodings! Only last night I had a dream, so ghastly, so horrible, that I woke up trembling, crying, and wishing that I could run to you for help."

He soothed her as one soothes a child. He was still very much in love; but already the delicate reserve, the humble

self-mistrust, of the suitor had vanished, and the removal of an imperceptible barrier, transparent and brittle too, like glass, had prepared him for the first step in that downward path, of which the gradations, slow but sure, are custom, indifference, weariness, and neglect.

"Tell me your dream," said he, taking her fair forehead between his hands and kissing it.

"I was in a garden of roses—double roses—that shed their leaves in showers over a lawn. I was walking with you, sire, and with another lady—a lady whose dark mischievous eyes and proud step seemed to enjoy crushing the poor rose-leaves trodden under foot. You were laughing together, but I could not understand what you said. By degrees, as we walked on, the flowers withered, the sky darkened, and your two faces changed: on hers there came a smile of malice and cunning that made me fain to cry aloud between anger and fear; but you, sire, looked pale and sad, pitiful too, as it seemed, not only of another, but of yourself. I turned to ask why, and behold you were gone. The garden had become a desert; the sky was dark with clouds. I felt so frightened, I wanted to run home, but could not. Something stronger than myself seemed to force me on, through the deepening gloom, towards a small white object wavering in the distance. When I approached it, my blood ran cold; it was the figure of a nun, wrinkled, dwarfed, decrepit, wrapped in a shroud, praying on her knees at an empty tomb. I could not hear my own step, yet it disturbed her. She rose, crossed herself, threw her shroud upon the tomb, and exclaiming, 'It is for thee!' ascended into the heavens. I tried to follow; but my feet seemed fastened to the ground, and a mocking voice whispered in my ear, 'Of the earth, earthy! Thou hast made thy choice, and it is too late!' Then the lady who had been walking with us pointed jeeringly, laughed, and disappeared. I tried to answer, to move my feet, to cry

aloud for help, and in the effort I awoke. But the strangest thing is yet to tell. The nun's face was the same as the lady's, only wasted with suffering, and seamed with age—a well-known face that we see every day. I will give you ten guesses, sire, a score, a hundred, to tell me who she was.”

“Madame? She has the ugliest sneer of any woman I know.”

“Try again.”

“My sainted mother? The Great Mademoiselle? Not the Queen? My wife is scarce witty enough to mock anybody, and besides, she has too good a heart.”

Louise blushed and hung her head. Not the least bitter drop in her cup of humiliation was the consciousness of injury done to that courteous and gentle lady, from whom she had never yet received an unkind word or a contemptuous look.

“None of these,” she answered: “that was what made my dream so odd, so uncomfortable. No; it was my dearest friend who mocked and flouted me—Mademoiselle de Mortemar.”

“You mean Madame de Montespan.”

“I should have said Madame de Montespan. You cannot think how cruel, how malicious she looked.”

“She has fine eyes,” observed the King; “she has wit too, and seems the gayest of the gay. Ask her to pass the evenings here sometimes, Louise: she amuses me.”

A pang shot through her, very keen, very searching, but of which she was heartily ashamed. In her desire to appear above the little jealousies of her sex, she overacted her part, and exclaimed rather too eagerly, “To-night, sire, if you like: I can send to her hotel this instant. Do you wish the invitation should come from your Majesty or from me?”

He looked vexed, almost angry. Nothing provokes a man so much as to be taken at his word, when he makes an offer that is meant to be declined.

"If you find me so dull, Louise," said he, "by all means invite anybody you please to cheer you up."

The tender heart was very sensitive, very easily hurt. Louise could hardly keep back her tears, but she made a bold effort, and tried to answer cheerfully—

"Not *anybody*, sire! The first comer does not always find the warmest welcome. Only Athénée is such a dear old friend; we grew up together; we never had a secret from each other during the happiest years of our lives."

There was still some ill-humour in his tone when he replied—

"And she pleases me. I admire her good looks; I am rather amused with her conversation."

"All the more reason," answered Louise, making bad worse.

"Mademoiselle!" burst out the King,—*"a thousand pardons! I mean to say, Madame la Duchesse,—you are an incomprehensible person! I cannot fathom your meaning. I have no idea what you are aiming at. Are you trying to torment me? Do you want to drive me mad? You provoke me; you distress me. Louise, Louise, you cut me to the heart!"*

How beautiful she looked, in amazement, in consternation, with eyes wide open, and red lips apart!

"Do not speak to me so," she murmured; "I cannot bear it. I had rather you would kill me with your sword. What have I done? what have I done?"

"You do not love me," said the King, softening. "It is impossible for love to exist without jealousy, and, behold, you seem to admit you would see me at the feet of Madame de Montespan without a pang!"

With all her frankness and simplicity of character, she was a woman. Her woman's wit told her that only a lover very far gone in love could have propounded so monstrous

and unjustifiable a statement. It was not, therefore, without some secret triumph that she proceeded to argue her case.

"Where there is true love, sire," she insisted, "there is perfect confidence, and perfect confidence finds no room for fear. It is not for my merit you care for me, or I should be of all women the most suspicious, the most exacting. It is out of the nobility of your own royal heart, and therefore I am not afraid. If it were possible you could do me wrong, there would simply be an end of everything—faith, hope, illusions, reality, life itself! But it is impossible. You cannot be anything but Louis, your own generous, noble, truthful self; and I believe in you, as I believe in heaven!"

"You are an angel," said the King, looking fondly on the face that was indeed angelic in its pure and loving beauty. "I think you could forgive a rival, even if she were Madame de Montespan."

"I would try," answered the girl. "No! I should hate her, and I should hate you too, if I could. Yet that is impossible. I would never see either of you again, and I would die!"

"My darling, you are more woman than angel after all!" exclaimed the King, "and I love you the better. Adieu, Louise, but not for long. Let me see you to-night at court; and pay attention, do not forget where you are to sit. I shall be proud and happy to salute the beautiful Duchesse de Vaujour in her proper place."

So the King took leave, pleased with himself, pleased with his ladye-love, ignoring honestly enough, in his self-satisfaction, her false position and his own, unconscious, as a deaf man of a discord, that in appearing, by his desire, at the palace with a smiling face, she did violence to her woman's nature, baring her woman's heart again and yet again to slow and cruel torture for his sake.

But it must be undergone, nevertheless. Either from a

want of sensibility unusual in a character so finely organized, or from an education that had accustomed him to ignore the nicer shades of feeling in those whom he honoured with his notice, Louis permitted no weaknesses, moral or physical, to stand in the way of his own convenience; and a courtier, gentleman or lady, who would be worthy of the name, was expected on occasion to display the endurance of a camel, the digestion of an ostrich, a frame of iron, and a forehead of brass.

On the King's journeys from the Tuileries to Fontainebleau, St. Germain's, Versailles, and, later in life, to Marly, it was essential that he should be accompanied, in his six-inside coach, by such ladies of the household as were invited in due rotation. The summons was imperative, and on no plea were they to be excused. These fair travellers might be in the worst possible condition for travelling, but cold or sunshine, wet or dry, go they must. Baskets of food were prepared, of which, at his Majesty's pleasure, it was indispensable to eat with good appetite. The halts were few and far between; nor were such intervals of repose prolonged beyond the few minutes necessary to change horses; and, however thick the dust, however bright the glare, to pull the window up, or the blind down, was an offence that entailed black looks, perhaps cutting reproaches, during the rest of the expedition. One of the most remarkable and most beautiful characteristics of woman is the idolatry with which she loves to worship a thoroughly selfish man. It originates probably in her liking for the sacrificial rite. Something must be offered up. Her own convenience, comfort, happiness, no matter what, the more precious the gift, the more readily is it laid on the altar. This is the quality which makes good mothers, careful nurses, docile wives, and tender mistresses. Trading on this blind and feminine generosity, unscrupulous men have been known to lead lives

of ease and idleness at the expense of partners who worked like slaves for their tyrants, wholly, as it would seem, in consideration of their transcendent worthlessness.

Not because of his merits did Louise de la Vallière give up her whole life to one who was good enough to accept it calmly, courteously, and as of right. Not because he was young, and handsome, and gay, and pleasing, and a king. No! she loved him because she suffered for his sake, because every hour of the day brought its twinge of remorse, its flush of shame, its open slight, or its covert sneer, on his account. These she prized as the privileges of martyrdom, and it is but justice to admit that his Majesty afforded her every opportunity of enduring her torture bravely before the world.

CHAPTER II.

THE TABOURET.

"MADAME LA DUCHESSE DE VAUJOUR!" shouted a dark-browed Swiss, in such stentorian tones as might have called the cows to pasture on his native mountains.

"Madame la Duchesse de Vaujour!" repeated a royal lackey in pink silk stockings and cloth of gold.

"She is not amiss—that one," muttered a sentry of the Gardes Françaises, looking after a dainty vision of satin and laces that glided up the palace stairs, while the announcement was passed from valet to page, and from page to gentleman usher, till it reached the inmost circle, and drew a momentary elevation of eyebrow from the Grand Chamberlain himself.

The best society does not always show that true politeness which springs from goodness of heart. Gentlemen, indeed, preserved a discreet indifference; but ladies shrugged their shoulders, pursed their lips, and even in one or two flagrant instances whispered each other audibly, "There she is!" "But, madame, this is too much!" "How will the Queen take it?" "My dear, what is it that he sees in her?"

For certain armies, military discipline has established a punishment called "running the gauntlet," wherein a culprit passes between the ranks of his regiment, while each comrade delivers a blow. The new Duchess gained some experience of its severity as she traversed a large and crowded saloon to make her obeisance before the Queen. Those who watched

her Majesty—and they were many—did not fail to notice that a momentary shadow darkened her brow, while in the beautiful Spanish eyes there came a troubled look of pain, regret, and reproach ; but already the sorrows of her young life had taught Maria Theresa that even royalty must not expect happiness in this lower world, and a tender, kindly heart, schooled in adversity while sustained by religion, had clothed her with that Christian charity which resolves to observe no beam of evil so long as it can see the slightest mote of good.

The poor young Duchess felt her knees shake, and her senses fail, as she made a profound reverence in the presence that of all others inspired her with shame and dread ; but the Queen, noticing her embarrassment, raised her by the hand with marked kindness, kissed her on both cheeks, and welcomed her with a courtesy that heaped coals of fire on her head.

“Permit me to congratulate you, Madame la Duchesse,” said her Majesty, “with all my heart. You look pale, you are tired, suffering. Assume at once the seat to which your rank entitles you. I venture to hope we shall see you amongst us very often.”

Louise muttered something unintelligible, and sank down on her tabouret completely overcome ; but the King, who stood aloof from the circle, gave his wife a look of gratitude and approval that brought the tears to her eyes.

Alas that in this, as in so many marriages, devoted affection on one side should have commanded but a lukewarm friendship on the other ! Had Louis loved his queen a quarter as well as she loved him, the tabouret of at least *one* duchess must have remained unoccupied, nor would this story ever have been written. And yet, with its many privileges, the favoured seat was but a stool of repentance after all. Courtiers, indeed, particularly of the male sex, were

unremitting in their attentions to the blue-eyed girl whom the King delighted to honour ; but some of the great ladies, and notably one or two of the blood royal, betrayed by looks and gestures a marked distaste to her dress, her manners, her general character, and, above all, her promotion to high rank. The "Great Mademoiselle," first cousin to the King himself, a lady of middle age, extravagant ideas, and regal demeanour, turned a bony and angular back with no little rudeness on the new Duchess ; and Madame, bursting with jealousy and spite, congratulated her sarcastically on the right to sit down that must be a welcome boon to one afflicted with her bodily infirmity.

"I have in some way incurred your Highness's displeasure," pleaded poor Louise, overpowered by the acrimony of her enemy. "Pardon me if I observe that I cannot see how I have offended."

"Then the Duchess is blind as well as lame !" was the brutal retort.

Louise, with strength and courage failing, hung her head like a scolded child, and held her peace.

But, as is often the case, this violence of attack defeated its own object. The King, wounded in his most sensitive feelings, jealous of his authority, and feeling his dignity slighted, came in solemnly to the rescue.

"If the eyes of Madame la Duchesse are not the most useful," said he, with a gravity so severe as to be ludicrous, "at least they are the most ornamental in the room. If she halts, she is also graceful. In consideration of both infirmities, I ask her to accept my support, while I lead her with my own hand to join her real friends."

Executing an elaborate bow, the chivalrous deference of which brought into strong contrast the icy glare bestowed on Madame and Mademoiselle, he conducted Louise out of the royal circle, and, placing her on a sofa by the side of

Madame de Montespan, took a chair in front of the two ladies, with an air that seemed to set cavil and comment at defiance.

He could not have chosen a better ally. The easy tact and lively conversation of Athénée covered all that was too remarkable in the King's assiduous protection of the Duchess, while anything like sentiment, of which people are justly intolerant in society, seemed wholly incompatible with those sarcastic repartees and rejoinders that so confused the dull intellect of Monsieur de Montespan, who had already adopted a firm and impenetrable obstinacy, as the only effectual protection from the shafts of his wife's wit.

Athénée greeted her friend with extreme cordiality, congratulating the new-made duchess on her promotion, and protesting, with one quick covert glance at the King, that she envied nobody in the world so much as her dear Louise.

He was pleased, and showed it. "By St. Louis!" said he, with looks of undisguised admiration at the dark eyes that sparkled so merrily, "it is quite refreshing to meet approval for anything one does. They seem to think me but a lost sheep, yonder," nodding towards the royal circle. "Madame's brow is black as night, and Mademoiselle looks as if she would never smile again."

Athénée's silvery laugh rang out across the room.

"What would you have, sire? The Great Mademoiselle has been a mousquetaire in petticoats from childhood. I have heard she was your Majesty's earliest enemy."

"Do you think she frowned as fiercely when, with her own hand, she fired a gun from the Bastille?"

"And killed a husband at the first shot! Ah, sire! you have been a mark for woman's artillery ever since you could run alone, and yet, behold! you are still alive and well."

The King laughed. "My time will come, I suppose,"

said he carelessly, "like anybody else. Does it hurt much, I wonder, to be killed by a beautiful archer in a bodice?"

"It would be a duel to the death, sire," she answered, with a good deal of coquetry. "The archer might come by the worst. A woman who marched out to battle with the intention of taking your Majesty prisoner would be likely enough to return in fetters herself—none the lighter for being lined with satin, and made of gold."

"Do you think I should prove an unmerciful conqueror?" asked the King, lowering his voice, while he glanced anxiously at Louise.

"I am not conquered yet, so I cannot give an opinion," answered Madame de Montespan, dismissing the subject with a laugh, while she turned carelessly away, to whisper in the ear of her friend, whose gentle face wore an expression of discomfort and constraint, quite unconnected with the slight she had experienced from Madame or Mademoiselle.

It is strange how family likenesses assert themselves in supreme moments, in the spasm of terror, the agony of pain, the stillness of death, even in the discomfiture of petty vexation and annoyance. Another face in the room, ten paces off, bore exactly the same expression as that of the young Duchess, warped by some inward feeling precisely similar to his sister's, while Henri le Blanc watched Athénée's voluble conversation with the King.

The exigencies of politeness, the very decencies of society, forbade him to intrude on such an interview; yet every word spoken, every look and smile interchanged, hurt him like the thrust of a knife.

True she was now another man's wife, and as such lost to him for ever; but Henri, like most Frenchmen, and all mousquetaires, looked on the sacred bond of matrimony as

something wholly different from, and very antagonistic to, the tender link of love.

We protest we worship without hope,—that we only ask to sun ourselves, now and again, in the presence of our divinity,—that for us it is enough if the outpourings of an honest affection be accepted graciously, without promise of return. But this beautiful theory is hardly carried out in the experiences of daily life. Man, prone to self-deception, finds his hunger of the heart sharpened rather than appeased by the crumbs his goddess is good enough to throw him; the goddess herself, to whom sameness of any kind must always be objectionable, alternates indifference with encouragement, till the tormented votary, now rebuffed, now tantalised, loses his firmness, his integrity, his common sense: as one advances, the other draws back; but still the distance gradually lessens between the opposing forces, and at last, without intending it, each has so shifted ground that they change places in the varying conflict,—the worshipper becomes an idol, and the idol a slave.

Whether, as a general rule, women would wish to be treated solely as angels, it is not for me to determine. Madame de Montespan had at least so much of the angelic nature that she loved to soar above the common level of humanity; and if she ever looked up, it was but to attain a higher elevation, from which she might afterwards look down.

Precious as pearls, royalty must be sparing of its communications. The King soon rose, bowed, and, conversing with other courtiers, passed on to the end of the room.

Henri came forward to greet his sister with an enthusiasm of affection she was not vain enough to accept entirely for herself.

“I am not the rose, my brother,” said she, “but I am

very *near* the rose ;” and she made way for him to take his place at her friend’s side, while her eyes travelled after the King’s figure, and her thoughts, as usual, busied themselves about him—only *him* in the world.

“I never loved him more dearly than to-day,” thought Louise. “Why, then, do I feel so unhappy?”

“Madame de Montespan—Athénée,” whispered Henri, with a trembling lip, “what is it? What have I done, that you should put me to this torture?”

“What have *I* done, rather?” was the reply. “Do you know, monsieur, I am getting tired of these endless reproaches and recriminations: let us finish with them, once for all!”

“Be it so. You understand your own intentions best. You fly at high game, madame. You are afraid, perhaps, of interference from me and mine!”

“I am afraid of *nothing*, Henri—not even your violence and suspicions. How strange men are! What makes you all so cross, so jealous, and so utterly unreasonable?”

He softened at once. She could turn him with a thread. “Forgive me,” said he. “I am anxious and unhappy. The ground seems to give way under my feet. I have suffered intolerably; I have endured so much——”

“From me?”

“From you! Think of my despair when you were married to Monsieur de Montespan.”

“Bah! that happens to everybody. Afterwards?”

He looked nervously round, hesitated, and sank his voice yet lower, while he murmured, “And now, the King!”

“What of the King?” she returned calmly, with an unmoved countenance, as if the question were of a pet dog.

“He is ready to fall at your feet!” exclaimed the other passionately. “I know what it is. Oh! there is no need

to tell *me* ! He worships the ground you tread on, and he had better be in hell ! ”

A little gleam of triumph lighted up her face, to be lost instantaneously in her mocking smile.

“ You are flattering,” she retorted, “ and I accept the compliment. Better be an angel of darkness than no angel at all. Shall I tell you that you are mistaken ? Shall I tell you that you are mad ? Or shall I tell you that women are the creatures of circumstances, that we cannot do as we would, and that our helplessness is the curse of our lot ? ”

“ Tell me anything, only speak on in those soft tones for ever. Listen to me, Athénée. I can bear, I *have* borne, a great deal. There are two sides to every question, and a man must plead his own cause. What have I in exchange for the devotion of a life ? A look once a day ; a pressure of the hand once a week ; a whisper once a month. Do I complain ? No ; it is enough, and I ask for no more. But withdraw this pittance, and you shall see. Let me only be assured that in your heart, not in your vanity, your recklessness, your ambition, but in your heart, Athénée, you care for some one else, and, as I stand here a living man, I will never look on yours, nor any other human face, again ! ”

“ Have pity on me ! What will you do ? ”

“ I will seek death wherever it is most speedy and most certain. I will obtain my dismissal, and go to the frontier, to Turkey—what do I know ? There is fighting to be had in Europe still, and they will be glad to get a mousquetaire. I will offer my breast to the enemy. I will die for your sake, and, Athénée, when I am dying I shall love you as dearly, as fondly, as ungrudgingly, as I do now ! ”

Her heart smote her. She remembered to have seen one of the King’s piqueurs sewing up the gash of a stag’s horn in a stag-hound’s side. She had been strangely touched by

the loving trust, the patient wondering sorrow, in the dog's honest eyes. There was the same expression in Henri's now. Her own filled with tears, and a great drop hung in her long eyelashes, till it fell with a splash on the floor.

Louise, ever watching the King, observed him shift his position, advance two or three paces towards them, and walk uneasily away. Again she wondered how she could be unhappy while she felt so proud, so confident, so secure in his love.

He was never tired of giving her proofs of it. An hour later, at the Hôtel Biron, which now belonged to her, in the seclusion of her own apartment, he taxed her with indifference, for making so little use of her influence—for abstaining from all demands not only on her own behalf, but to promote her friends.

"I saw your brother to-day," said he kindly. "You have never made a request on his account, so I have given him something without your asking."

"Sire! you are too good. You overwhelm me with benefits. Henri is a mousquetaire to the ends of his fingers: I hope it is an appointment that will afford the opportunity of serving your Majesty."

"I have given him a regiment in Flanders with Turenne. The campaign will be advantageous to a young officer, as it promises to be short, sharp, and decisive. Let us talk about something else!"

She threw her arms round his neck. How good he was! how considerate! how kind! and, above all, how true!

CHAPTER III.

FOREWARNED.

“MADAME is taking coffee in her own apartment; she desires to speak with monsieur.”

“My compliments to madame, I will wait on her the moment I have completed my toilet.”

Such were the terms on which husband and wife lived, after a few months of marriage, in the upper classes of French society during the “good old times”—the *Siècle Louis Quatorze*.

“My faith!” thought the pretty lady’s-maid who carried to and fro such polite messages. “When Adolphe and I are married, we shall not be so ceremonious. What! Monsieur has his apartment; madame has her apartment. They do not communicate; on the contrary, it is a promenade, a day’s march, to go from one to the other. Gentlefolks have queer ways, one must admit. My poor Adolphe, what wouldst thou say if I made so many phrases before giving thee a simple good morning? Ah! my treasure, it is time enough to think of that when I see thee back from Flanders—a corporal, who knows?—a sergeant, perhaps; and yet, and yet I would thou wert but a scullion here in the kitchen, so that I had thee safe at home!”

Then she wiped her eyes, crossed herself, and denounced the Low Countries with all her heart.

Perhaps the mistress had no greater affection for that battle-ground of Europe than the maid.

Athénée de Montespan, sitting before her glass, buried in thought, with her hair about her shoulders, was passing through such a crisis as comes to most of us once or twice in a lifetime, and affects our whole future, according to the mood in which it leaves us. The Greek had his good and his evil genius to whisper alternately in his ear. For the wild huntsman of Germany there rode a black and a white horseman at either stirrup, that he might take counsel, as he chose, from the angel or the fiend. Every one of us in his pilgrimage comes to a place where two roads meet, and on his turning, right or left, depends the whole course of his journey, the safety of its end. That is a well-worn metaphor of the pebble at its source, which determines the current of a mighty river, whether it shall roll into one ocean or another. How forcibly it illustrates the whole career of man—the vicissitudes, the progress, and the destiny of a human soul !

Madame de Montespan was neither weakly nor wilfully blind. She had no fear of standing face to face with her own heart ; could plead, cross-examine, sum up, and find guilty, without a shadow of partiality for the offender. Sitting in her easy-chair, perusing, line by line, the beauty opposite in her mirror, she arraigned and passed sentence on that culprit without admitting any excuse of extenuating circumstances as tempting to crime.

She had been false—yes, it was no use making phrases, she would call things by their right names—false to her friendship, her love, her loyalty, and her duty. Was she not planning a conquest that could only be made in marching over the broken heart of poor gentle Louise—a girl she had protected from childhood, looking on her as a very dear and helpless younger sister ? Was she not darkening a life that existed for her alone, while she caused Henri le Blanc unceasing anxiety and affliction, none the less galling that

he must bear his sorrow with a smooth brow, hiding it from his nearest friend and comrade, even under the guns of an enemy? Ah! what would be her feelings if he were to fall, this dashing mousquetaire, and she must never look on the gentle, handsome face again? It might be better so—better for *her*, at least; but then would it not be her work? Horrible! Must she be answerable for his blood? And his Majesty, for whose stolen glances, for whose admiration, as yet scarce implied, all these breaches of faith and truth were committed, did she really care for him? Would she, like Louise, have wished to see him a simple peasant rather than King of France? Was it love or ambition that had prompted her advances and her treachery? A little, perhaps, of one; much, certainly, of the other. It would be a noble task to conquer both. She came of a line that, if they rarely showed pity, at least knew no fear. The Mortemars of Tonnay-Charente had ever been lavish of blood and treasure, had waged lands and vassals, life and limb, freely in the cause of right: would she draw back now from any sacrifice, be it of her highest hopes, to preserve the traditions of her race?

And her husband? The last consideration, indeed, yet one, she could not but admit, that should carry a certain weight. Was Monsieur de Montespan to count for nothing in this nicely adjusted balance of false and fair, profit and principle, right and wrong? She did not love him; of course that was not worth mentioning, but with all bargains there must, in common honesty, be some satisfaction of value received. Why did she marry him? That was easily answered. Because she wanted servants, liveries, carriages of her own, a house, a position, and unlimited credit with her milliner; because she was tired of being a maid of honour; because—because, in short, because all girls married before they came to three-and-twenty. Mon-

sieur de Montespan provided for her the necessaries of life, not entirely without grudging ; but still there they were, and he had a right to something in exchange. Not affection, not caresses ; no, but a little management of his self-love, a little regard for the honour of his name.

There was but one straight course, one way out of the difficulty. Though she drew blood from her fingers in the process, she must cut the Gordian knot with her own hands. Therefore she summoned monsieur to her apartment. Therefore, monsieur, scanning with approval the waist of Adolphe's chosen, presented himself in complete toilet to wait on madame.

She never professed to love him, permitting none of those familiarities which seem natural to the greetings of husband and wife, treating him rather with a cold and sarcastic politeness that cut even his dull nature to the quick. He longed to resent it, but felt overmatched by his ready-witted adversary, and thought well to take refuge in obstinate, impenetrable sulks. He could contradict her in deeds, if not in words ; and, when relieved from the constraint of her presence, prided himself no little on the resistance of this negative force. Madame might have it all her own way in conversation ; but fashionable small-talk was not reality, and, if it came to a trial of strength, she should find he was less a man of thought than a man of action.

"Good morning, monsieur. Have I disturbed your arrangements by begging of you to visit me so early ?"

"Good morning, madame. Early or late, I am always at your orders."

"You have taken coffee, monsieur ?"

"Two hours ago, madame."

"Sit down, then, and let us have a chat. I promise not to detain you long. Justine, go into the next room and shut the door."

Monsieur de Montespan took a chair, laid his hat and cane carefully by his feet, opened a gold snuff-box, and looked inquiringly at his wife.

She rose, crossed the room, and laid her hand on his shoulder.

"I am in a difficulty," said she. "I have been thinking it over till my head aches. You are my husband, and I have sent for you to help me out."

He drew back in some alarm.

"You want money, of course. Money, money! it is always the same story. Speak to my intendant, madame. He has my instructions; he will give you an answer."

A shade of contempt swept over the haughty, handsome face.

"It is no question of money, nor of your intendant. I want counsel; more, I want help. Do you comprehend, monsieur? I want a strong arm to lean on, lest I fall."

He looked at his own, examining its proportions with a literal acceptance of her metaphor that made her laugh.

"I never walk out so early, madame," said he; "but some day this week I can attend you in the afternoon."

"Try to understand me," she answered patiently. "We are husband and wife; we ought to have *some* interests in common. At least, it is of importance to both that the name of Montespan should be pronounced with respect. So far as its honour has been in my keeping, I have preserved it unstained."

"I should hope so, madame! What! we are not people of yesterday."

"Do not be hard, monsieur. Do not set yourself against comprehending me. You are a man of courage; at least, I suppose so, since you are well born. If a dozen enemies drew on you at once, would you be ashamed to run away?"

"Not if I were unarmed, perhaps. I cannot tell. I am a peer of France, and I have never known fear."

"I am unarmed: I have too many enemies. I may be brave enough, I dare say, but after all I am only a woman. It is better to retreat than to offer battle and be defeated. Great heavens! monsieur, can you not understand me?"

"Give yourself the trouble, madame, to tell me in plain language what it is you require."

"Speak kindly to me. There are moments when life is saved from drowning by a little finger. Take me away from here, monsieur, I beseech you. I have not been a good wife, but I will try to become better. I will even learn to love you, if you will let me."

"*Learn* to love me, indeed! It ought not to seem so difficult. *Learn* to love me! Madame, what words are these?"

"It is precisely because I wish to please you that I ask to go away. Take me from the court; that is all I require. It will be worse for both of us if you refuse. I cannot answer for myself, isolated, lonely, misunderstood. I have pride; I have honour; I have a conscience. I implore you, monsieur, take me into Gascony, and let me save them all while there is yet time."

"Into Gascony, madame, and at this season! It is unheard of—impossible. Do you know what you ask? His Majesty would forget our very existence!"

Her eyes expressed scorn, wonder, and a wistful pity for herself, while she placed her hand on his arm again, and looked searchingly in his face.

"Are you blind?" she asked. "Can you not see it is the King I desire to avoid? If you are a man, monsieur, let us set out now, this very instant. To-morrow I may have no wish to go!"

He stared at her with a faint and momentary glimmering of the truth, too soon extinguished in the obtuseness and self-sufficiency of his character.

"It does not suit me," said he loftily, "to travel at present. Nor does it become *you*, madame, to cherish these illusions, these chimeras, and to impart them to *me*. You are in a state of exaltation, of over-excitement; in short, of indisposition. You will have a nervous attack, a headache, and afterwards you will be better. Let us drop the subject; I am tired of it!"

She turned white to her very lips. Her fine figure swayed and vibrated like a willow in the wind, then with clenched teeth, and hands closed tight, grew rigid as if changed to stone, while, each by each, the syllables fell clear and cutting in their withering emphasis of scorn—

"Good, monsieur! It is enough: you are forewarned."

"Forewarned, madame, is forearmed. I have the honour to salute you, and take my leave."

As the door closed on him, Justine entered, out of breath, with a letter in her hand.

The Mortemars were notorious for their self-command. No one could have guessed how wild a storm raged below the surface by Athénée's quiet tone and manner, while she asked her maid if any one waited for an answer.

"No, madame."

"Who brought it?"

"A mousquetaire, madame," replied Justine, still blushing, perhaps at the compliments paid her by the messenger *en mousquetaire*.

Athénée's cheek was paler than ever, but she read the letter through without faltering by so much as an eyelash. It was such a tissue of protestations, extravagances, and complaints as is written by a man to the woman he loves, when he has placed himself in the false position of a bond-slave, and has allowed one to obtain absolute and irresponsible authority who would have been far happier in the submission of her proper place.

He enlarged on his appointment to the command of a regiment, on his favour with the King, on his ambition, his prowess, his thirst for distinction, and his firm resolution to die on the field of honour; but the death and the glory, the wounds and the decorations, were scrupulously set down to her account. He boasted of his truth, his constancy, his sorrows, and his love. It was all over now, he told her a score of times: he had vowed solemnly, irrevocably, never to look on her fair false face again; and yet—for with every second line he relented, and turned round like a weather-cock—when they *did* meet in the distant future, she would be satisfied at a glance that he had never wavered in his allegiance, but that in all those years (an indefinite period not distinctly specified) his every thought had been for *her*! So far there was nothing in the letter to rouse a sentiment deeper than pity, with a dash of scorn; but the concluding lines, written naturally and unaffectedly from the heart, brought tears to her eyes.

“It is now midnight, and we march at daybreak. Everything is packed up, except your picture; that goes with *me*, of course. When you get this, we shall be five leagues off. Tear it up; it is a wicked letter, and full of reproaches, but I do not mean them. If I cared less, I could write more agreeably; but I must always love you the same, always and for ever. Our band has orders to play your favourite march, and in my regiment the word for the day is ‘Tonnay-Charente.’ Adieu!”

“My poor Henri!” she murmured, and lifted her eyes once more to the mirror, with a strange questioning glance that seemed to ask, sadly enough, wherein consisted the power of that reflected face to drive men into madness with its smile.

The glass answered very frankly, that its equal was not to be found at court, and surely it must be irresistible by high and low.

"It is my destiny," said Madame de Montespan, rising to pace the room with proud elastic step. "It is stronger than me. Everything pushes me on. This foolish boy who vanishes, to be knocked on the head at the crisis of my fortunes, I never liked him so well as to-day. Folly! That is pure contradiction. My husband—— What a husband! Impenetrable, dull, egotistical, and as obstinate as a mule; not even polite, like any other gentleman. *He* to affect authority! to assume command! I congratulate you, monsieur. In very truth, you shall be obeyed to the letter! But, Louise, my good and gentle Louise, I cannot bear to do you an unkindness. She has no self-respect, no force of character: she will not mind it much! Yet she loves him dearly, too. Bah! she must take her chance with the others. It is too late: I cannot stop now. Justine, quick, my child, bestir thyself! Come and dress me—very carefully, for I am going to court."

CHAPTER IV.

MINE OWN FAMILIAR FRIEND.

FOND of glory as of amusement, yet not keen enough in pursuit of one wholly to neglect the other, Louis the Great loved to combine the toils of warfare with certain indulgences more appropriate to a jaunt, a picnic, or a party of pleasure than a campaign.

Long after his troops had marched for the frontier, and taking full advantage of the protracted delays with which military operations were then carried on, he would set out from Paris or Versailles, accompanied by the Queen and half the ladies of her court, to travel by easy stages in lengthening lines of coaches till he reached the front, bringing with him to the camp many of the luxuries and all the petty intrigues of the court. With personal courage above the average, he was wise enough to set a proper value on his own life, and preferred to the brilliant success of forced marches and unexpected collisions the more deliberate proceedings of a siege, where, taking the command at his leisure, under cover from the fire of an enemy, he could refer for counsel to the first engineer in Europe when at a loss.

Louis and Vauban together had established an elaborate theory of attack and defence that made the capture of fortified places a mere question of figures—a sum depending solely on time, supplies, and proportion of strength. That a fight would on occasion upset all these calculations was obviously not the fault of the theory, but of the fight.

It seemed excusable enough in a young hero to be fond of war, who could thus take it at his ease, combining its excitement with feasting, fiddling, luxury, ladies, laughter, and love; nor is it even the private soldier, the honest fellow lying on wet straw and eating mouldy biscuit, who is most to be pitied in that great game which the world has never ceased playing from infancy to old age. No; it is the poor peasant who has nothing to gain from either side, and who only knows that, whichever way victory inclines, he must be content to see his cattle taken, his harvest spoiled, his homestead burned, and his children crying for bread.

What matter? The King had his cutlet every day, his wine, his sweetmeats, and the cooling medicine prescribed by his court physician, when required.

Behold, then, a ponderous six-inside coach labouring and jolting under the poplars on a paved road that ran northward in a hopelessly direct line as far as the eye could see. Eight Normandy horses, neighing, snorting, squealing, plunged, clattered, and swerved against each other, to the indignation of their postillions, who swore volubly out of a cloud of dust. The huge machine groaned, creaked, and swung; the Queen crossed herself, Madame de Montespan laughed, the others talked all at once, and Louise de la Vallière felt her head ready to split.

“What dust!”

“What heat!”

“It is fearful!”

“It is unheard of!”

“I choke; I suffocate: I can bear no more; I am at my last gasp!”

“In truth, I pity you, madame, but I, too, suffer.”

“And I!”

“And I!”

“And I!”

"Indeed, ladies, it is more of a pilgrimage than a journey," said the Queen in her low melancholy tones. "But we must not complain, for it pleases the King."

While she spoke, her eyes happened to rest on Madame de la Vallière. Louise would have given her hotel, lands, title, all her jewels, ten years of her life, not to blush; nevertheless, she crimsoned to the temples.

Ladies do not always spare each other on such occasions. The Queen, less considerate than usual, turned away with a shrug of the shoulders, an elevation of the eyebrows, that denoted anger and disgust; the others nodded, nudged elbows, and whispered. Madame de Montespan laughed outright.

"We all want to please the King," said she, "and some of us succeed passably well. It is impossible to say whose turn it will be next."

The very frankness of so audacious a proclamation modified its impropriety. The Queen condescended to smile; but Louise, depressed, shamefaced, and ill at ease, felt that sinking of the heart which never deceives, and is as surely followed by evil as a lowering sky by a storm.

"It is the duty of every subject to please his Majesty," said the Queen, whose smile had already faded into cold displeasure. "But I know nothing that annoys him so much as the officiousness of those who watch his every look and gesture, never taking their eyes off his person, and placing him under a constraint that would be unbearable to a simple gentleman in private life."

It was a long speech for her to make, and in its delivery her Majesty kept her looks bent on Madame de la Vallière, with an expression of severe disapproval that was humiliating in the extreme. Louise felt hurt beyond belief. Hitherto the Queen had treated her with a kindness as generous as it was unexpected; therefore such an ebullition, so marked, so pitiless, and so public, seemed to crush her into the dust.

With wet eyes and a sore heart she looked out of window to conceal her discomfiture.

They were passing a regiment on the march, part of a column under orders to move rapidly from the rear, so as to reach the scene of operations before the arrival of his Majesty. The men, oppressed by heat and dust, fatigued with the distance they were called upon to travel, straggled and loitered in twos and threes, even in single file. With coats thrown open, haversacks bulging, belts and pouches stained and slung awry, arms trailed and slanted in all the various positions that seemed easiest to weary wayfarers, this irregular body of infantry presented a very different appearance from that of the smart and soldier-like force Louis had reviewed but the other day in Paris, after his declaration of war.

Nevertheless, the actual material was serviceable enough. The sunburnt faces showed courage and determination; the lounging forms were spare and sinewy; the arms, well cleaned and burnished, seemed only brighter for contrast with the patched uniforms and dusty shoes of a protracted march.

As the coach rolled slowly by, face after face dimmed in a mist of tears passed before the eyes of Louise like phantoms through a dream. Suddenly, with such a start as wakes up the dreamer, she recognised in one of those simple private soldiers the man whose love for her had drawn him into ruin—whose name, with all her power and influence, she dared not mention to the King.

Could it be? Yes, she knew it too well, too surely, in her heart of hearts. That was De Bragelone's dark, stern brow under the coarse, pointed grenadier cap; those were De Bragelone's deep, mournful eyes that looked straight into her own.

Would he recognise her? Could she acknowledge his greeting, if he did? What ought she to do? For one

moment a strange, wild impulse, that passed away as quickly as it came, prompted her to stretch her arms out and call upon him by name, bidding him take her away, anywhere out of these troubles and turmoils, this life of daily vexation, disappointment, and deceit. Though she could not love him—even now, in all her pity and self-reproach, she told herself she could not love him—he was kind, faithful, to be relied on, and she *did* so long for rest! She would have given anything to speak to him, if only one word and in a whisper; but, even as the word and the whisper rose to her lips, the coach stopped, the soldiers, adjusting arms and accoutrements, got hurriedly into line, and the word was passed down the ranks from captain to captain, and sergeant to sergeant, “Close in, men! Steady! Attention! Shoulder arms! The King! the King!”

On his white horse, gallant and beautiful, thought Louise, as he looked that memorable day in the forest of Fontainebleau, his Majesty came up at a gallop, and received the salute of his troops; then he passed along the ranks, with a word of approval for each separate grade down to the drummers; after which, at his own word of command, the regiment continued its march, with loud shouts of “Vive le Roi!”

Surely now, thought Louise, the time had come that was to make amends for all the sorrows and humiliations of her journey. It was such rapture to look at him, to hear his voice, to breathe the same air, to know that, in spite of the Queen’s presence, of his own duties, of right, decency, and etiquette, he loved to be near her still. It seemed somewhat hard that after a brief and hurried greeting, rather to the Duchesse de Vaujour than to Louise de la Vallière, his attention should have been centred on Madame de Montespan, to the exclusion of the other ladies and the Queen.

Athénée, so full of spirits half an hour ago, looked pale and heavy-eyed. In returning the King’s salute, she tried,

indeed, to assume that air of sprightliness and good-humour which she knew to be one of her attractions; but the effort was obviously painful, and could not be sustained. Her head sank against the cushions of the carriage, and she moaned with pain.

His face betrayed more anxiety than seemed called for by the occasion.

"You are ill, madame," said he: "you are suffering. What is it? What does it all mean?" and he looked angrily from the Queen to the other ladies for explanation.

Athénée tried hard to rally.

"It is nothing, sire," she murmured—"the heat, the movement of the coach—perhaps the surprise of your Majesty's sudden appearance."

Though she smiled, her cheek was so white, her attitude so languid, that already the others had caught the contagion of alarm.

"You are suffering," repeated the King. "It is most ill timed, most inconvenient; but you are seriously indisposed; you cannot continue your journey!"

"How? Must we, then, turn back?" asked the Queen. "It is impossible: the road is not wide enough!"

Appealing voices continued a shrill chorus of objections:—

"We shall find no inn to hold us."

"They are expecting us already at the camp!"

"We, too, are ill; we are broken with fatigue; we shall die on the high-road. It will be pitch dark in an hour, and the last stage is the longest of all!"

The King dropped his reins, and put both hands to his ears, like a man at whose feet a beehive has suddenly been upset. Madame de Montespan's pale face, however, roused him into action, and, with a decision no one knew better how to assume, he gave his directions in a tone that never failed to exact prompt obedience.

“Is there any lady here who has common sense?” said he, passing a stern look over the group, till his eyes rested with an expression of kindness and confidence on the face of the young Duchess. “Madame la Marquise should be housed at once. Let the coach be driven at speed to the next halting-place: there she must retire to bed. I will send a doctor back in a few hours from the front. She has fever; she is ill—seriously ill. It may be some infectious malady.”

The Queen seized a smelling-bottle. The others huddled together in corners as far from the invalid as the dimensions of a coach permitted,—all but Louise, who took Athénée’s hand in her own, and whispered words of encouragement in her ear.

“Should it come to the worst,” continued the King, “she must not be left alone. It would be cruel to abandon her in such a state. Who will remain behind, and nurse her till she is well?”

Profound and embarrassed silence, broken at length by a timid whisper from the Duchesse de Vaujour:—

“I will, sire: you can depend on me not to desert my post.”

“You!” exclaimed the King with marked surprise, but paused, reflected, hesitated, and added in a low voice, “Be it so; I consent. Louise, you are an angel!”

Then he turned bridle, and rode off at a gallop; for tears were in his eyes, and such emotions are below the dignity of a king.

Arrived at the next halting-place, a humble roadside inn, there was no question that Madame de Montespan had fallen seriously ill. Her eyes started from her head, her face flushed crimson, her hands felt burning hot, while her frame shivered with cold. The Queen and her ladies were only too glad to be quit of so dangerous a companionship,

and at nightfall Louise found herself watching by her early friend, lodged in a homely room, unpapered, uncarpeted, bare of all furniture but a wooden chair, a rude crucifix, and a print of the Holy Family over the bed.

The King, who had overtaken his own physician on the road, sent him back post-haste ; but what could a doctor do in such an extreme case, where the struggle had to be fought out hand to hand between life and death ? He could only declare the malady to be measles, pronounce it a favourable eruption, insist on perfect quiet, prescribe cooling medicine, and go to bed himself, with directions that he should be aroused if there appeared any change.

Years afterwards he would protest, with loud exclamations of admiration and approval, that Madame la Duchesse de Vaujour was not only the most beautiful, but the most efficient sick nurse he had ever known.

It was a long, long night. Athénée slept by snatches for an hour or two, but towards morning she began to toss restlessly under the bedclothes, waving her hands, and talking wildly, with all the eloquence and imagination of delirium.

Fixing her eyes on the ceiling, she held forth, and Louise, scared by their disclosures, felt her heart sink with a cruel conviction that through these tangled ravings there ran a terrible skein of truth.

Lying there, balanced, as it were, on the edge of the grave, Athénée imagined herself now a happy school-girl at Château de Blois, marking the places in her Prayer Book, making *galette* in the kitchen, ironing a white dress for her first communion ; now a maid of honour at the court of Madame, presenting the fan to her royal mistress, exchanging sallies with Count de Guiches, accepting clandestine notes from Henri le Blanc ; anon, walking in a garden with the King, replying to his eager protestations with reserve, caution, humility, and an avowal of love ; lastly, as

Queen of France, graciously offering a hand for Louise herself to kiss. Not once did she mention her husband, though she had not forgotten her children, desiring them to be brought in, that they might see her with royal robes and a crown on her head. Then she put the hair wildly from her brow, and exclaimed, "Ah! Louise, my friend, my sister, you should be in my place. He loved you, and I tried so hard to win him! But for me, he would never have left you. I shall be punished for it,—I know I shall, both here and hereafter, while *you*, Louise, my poor Louise, in this world, as in the next, you must always be an angel of light. I see you in shining raiment, I see you with wings, I see you fly up to heaven. Take me with you, and forgive me. I have sinned and I have repented, but my punishment is no greater than I deserve."

After this paroxysm came a death-like sleep, lasting several hours; and when the sufferer awoke, her patient, faithful nurse knew that the crisis was over, and a woman's soul had returned from the borders of another world.

The doctor had looked in an hour before, seen all was well, nodded, and disappeared. Louise heard the tramp of his horse at the inn door, when he mounted to resume his duties with the army. That familiar sound may have broken the invalid's slumbers, for Athénée, turning on her side, drew a deep breath of repose, and a faint voice coming from the bed murmured, "I must have been very ill! What was it? Who is that behind the curtain?"

"You have been at the point of death, dear," said the other, falling on her knees by the bedside; "but you are safe now."

"*You!*" exclaimed Madame de Montespan, with as much surprise as had been manifested by the King; "*you*, Louise! It is too much! How false I am! how ungrateful! It would have served me right to die."

CHAPTER V.

WOUNDED SORE.

No sooner was her friend out of danger than the Duchesse de Vaujour, sending couriers in advance to procure relays of horses, hurried on to the seat of war, stimulated, no doubt, by the secrets Madame de Montespan's illness had divulged. In vain that lady, with an address of which she was perfect mistress, repudiated her confession, as the mere ravings of fever, protesting, with engaging frankness, that she neither meant nor remembered a single word she uttered. Louise had but one desire, to escape from her company, and press forward to join the King. She would reach him, ay, on the field of battle; demand an interview, even under a storm of fire—why should misery fear death?—reproach him with his perfidy, vow never to see him more, and then—and then break her own heart, probably, in the self-inflicted penance. It galled her to feel that, in spite of his fickleness, his cruelty, his entire want of faith, she loved her traitor still. Yet was she proud of the sentiment, too.

With paved roads, devoted servants, and a purse full of gold, she made rapid progress, though, to her impatience, the six horses that dragged her carriage seemed to crawl. On the third day she came within a few leagues of the army. Traces of its march were frequent on the roadside. Here a vineyard trampled by cavalry, there a blackened circle that denoted the ashes of some bivouac fire. At one farm homestead the wall had been loopholed for musketry, and

half the orchard levelled to enable a battery to pass. The pioneers had done their work rudely, but to some purpose. A water-mill bore marks of recent occupation by a picket of the French Guards, in the adroitness with which a breast-work of turf and withies was thrown up for its protection, while a dead horse, not yet skinned, lay across the stone-paved gateway. Louise, soft of heart and tenderly nurtured, shuddered to observe these footprints of the destroyer, wondering in her simplicity how long wholesale murder and robbery would be dignified with the name of glory, yet not quite ignoring a certain strange thrill of excitement, caused by such tokens of violence and rapine.

Suddenly the postillion who rode her leaders turned round with a grin. Her coachman stopped, and held his hand up to listen.

A dull dead sound, less protracted than thunder, yet seeming to hang more sullenly on the ear; came up from the horizon. "It is the cannon!" said the coachman. "Without doubt, our army is engaged. Madame la Duchesse intends, of course, to turn back."

Her blue eyes shone, and the blood of La Vallière mounted to her cheek.

"Turn back!" she repeated. "Never! Forward! till we join the troops. You are Frenchmen: I suppose you are not afraid!"

"We are Frenchmen," echoed these brave fellows, full of courage at two leagues from the enemy. "Forward, and Vive le Roi!"

Whips cracked, voices shouted, harness jingled, and the coach rolled on, with more noise, more enthusiasm, but rather less speed than before.

Rising a hill, some half-dozen skirmishers were seen on the skirts of a distant wood, from which issued a flash of light, a white puff of smoke, followed, long afterwards, by

the faint report of a firelock. Again the coach stood still, for in the same direction the crackling of musketry announced serious operations and a well-sustained attack.

“Forward!” again commanded Louise, and forward, though unwillingly, they went.

Soon the plot began to thicken. Already the white tents of the French encampment were visible, and even the out-works of the fortress his Majesty had determined to invest. Non-combatants and followers of the army straggled in scores along the road, and a hamlet, through which her coach passed, was occupied by a company of infantry clearing the peasants’ cottages for reception of the sick and wounded.

“How far is it to the front?” asked Louise of a non-commissioned officer giving orders with one arm in a sling.

“How far, madame?” repeated this warrior, who was none other than Sergeant Leroux, of the Gardes Françaises. “My faith! it is a difficult question. Maybe less than half a league at this moment; but you see that is our regiment of the Guard which is engaged yonder, and we have the habit of advancing in double-quick time when we smell powder. Has madame, then, the intention to go on?”

“I came for the purpose,” answered Louise. “I am here expressly to find the King.”

Sergeant Leroux sprang to attention as rigidly as his bent arm would admit. “Vive le Roi!” said he. “Madame must make for head-quarters. If I mistake not, she will find his Majesty behind that wooded knoll. See! I carry a map of our lines in my head. She must descend the hill, ford a rivulet in the valley—— Pardon, madame, it is a bit of road made by all the devils, and if she can cross the ploughed field yonder in her coach, she will come on his Majesty and his staff, a musket-shot this side of the first parallel. Nay, madame, I beseech you! It is honour enough that I have indicated to madame the route.”

He pocketed the crown she forced on him, nevertheless, and looked after her carriage, as it laboured down the hill, with grim approval.

"That is the way to make war!" said he, pulling his long moustaches. "Good soldiers in front, good cheer, good wine, good company in support, and a beautiful woman with a coach and six in reserve. Right enough! One man must be a king, and another a corporal. What of that? With a crown-piece in his pocket, there is no better comrade in the army than Sergeant Leroux."

Then he returned to his duties, while Louise, urging her reluctant servants, proceeded at a slow pace down the hill. The road was bad, the ford treacherous, the opposite incline steep and rough. The horses steamed and panted; the coach jolted and swung. In the ploughed field indicated, her coachman pulled up, to assure Madame la Duchesse he could go no further. "Such ground," he declared, "would founder the poor animals, shake the coach to pieces, dislocate madame's bones—what did he know?—break her arm, her ribs, her neck! He could not undertake the responsibility: he would rather give up his place than drive another step! It was impossible to advance; and if he tried to turn round in such a morass, there must be an upset!"

But Louise had caught sight of a distant group of horsemen, with floating plumes and breast-plates glistening in the sun, gathered round a figure on a white charger, that she knew only too well. Her heart leaped for joy, and even jealousy was forgotten in the delight of once more beholding the man she loved.

"What do I care?" she exclaimed excitedly. "They are good horses: push them on at speed! The coach is strong and well built; but if it break in a thousand pieces, what matter? We have arrived at last."

"It is the will of Heaven!" muttered the coachman, as

he crossed himself and drove on. The horses plunged, strained, swerved, and turned aside, a buckle gave way; a leader fell; the wheels locked, and the whole unwieldy vehicle came with a crash to the ground.

Louise was soon extricated. The servants bestirred themselves to unharness the struggling horses, and raise the coach; but their mistress, though suffering violent pain from a sprained wrist, had no patience to await the tedious process, and hurried wildly forward on foot to meet the King.

His Majesty, who had observed the accident from a distance, was also approaching as fast as the nature of the ground would admit.

Louise, dizzy and confused, regardless of her injury, her fatigues, her thin shoes, cut and soaked at every step, her satin dress left in fragments on every bush and brier, pressed up the hill along a path that seemed the most direct for the point she wished to gain.

At a turn she came face to face with four soldiers of the Gardes Françaises, carrying a motionless comrade to the rear.

"Halt there!" exclaimed the oldest, a grizzled veteran, whose head was tied up in a bloody handkerchief, and who was more startled at this unexpected apparition than he would have been by a discharge of small arms. "Thunder of heaven! madame, what are you doing here? Turn your face, in the name of a thousand devils, and let us pass. Those are not sugar-plums they are throwing about down yonder; and this is an ugly sight for a lady of the court."

"Is he dead? Is there no hope? Where is he wounded?" gasped Louise, pale and horror-struck, but retaining the finest of all courage—that woman's courage which, if it fail in daring, is yet so noble to help and to endure.

"He has got his billet, by the permission of madame,"

answered the old soldier, with the politeness of a Frenchman under all circumstances to a pretty woman. "But the colonel ordered us to take him down to the horse-litters and Sergeant Leroux. Pardon, madame! See, he bleeds like a pig! That is no such bad sign."

She pulled a scarf from her shoulders, and tore it into strips with nimble fingers. "I can bandage him," said she. "Women are always good nurses. Lay him down here a minute, while I try to stanch the wound. My coach is at hand: we will put him in, and take him to the village. But do not leave me, I entreat you. Do not return into the trenches."

"Not such fools!" replied the other, pointing to his bandaged head. "For me, I have had my day's allowance—good measure. These two white-faced lads are but recruits, and would fain be at home with their mothers, watching the pot boil in the chimney-corner; while as for the drummer,—ha! little imp of mischief, hast thou then escaped, and run off again to the front? By my faith, madame, that child is the best grenadier of the four!"

This aspiring warrior, some twelve years of age, had indeed taken advantage of the opportunity to return and offer his heroic little person once more as a mark for the enemy. Kneeling over the prostrate form which, but for the blood that flowed so freely, showed no symptoms of animation, Louise recognised in that pale distorted face none other than the grenadier she had passed on the road, the day Madame de Montespan was taken ill—none other than the Marquis de Bragelone, banished and degraded, serving as a private soldier in the regiment he had once commanded as its colonel.

Struck in the head by a musket-ball, of which the full force was doubtless exhausted, his warped white features, clenched teeth, and rigid limbs afforded little hope. Blood

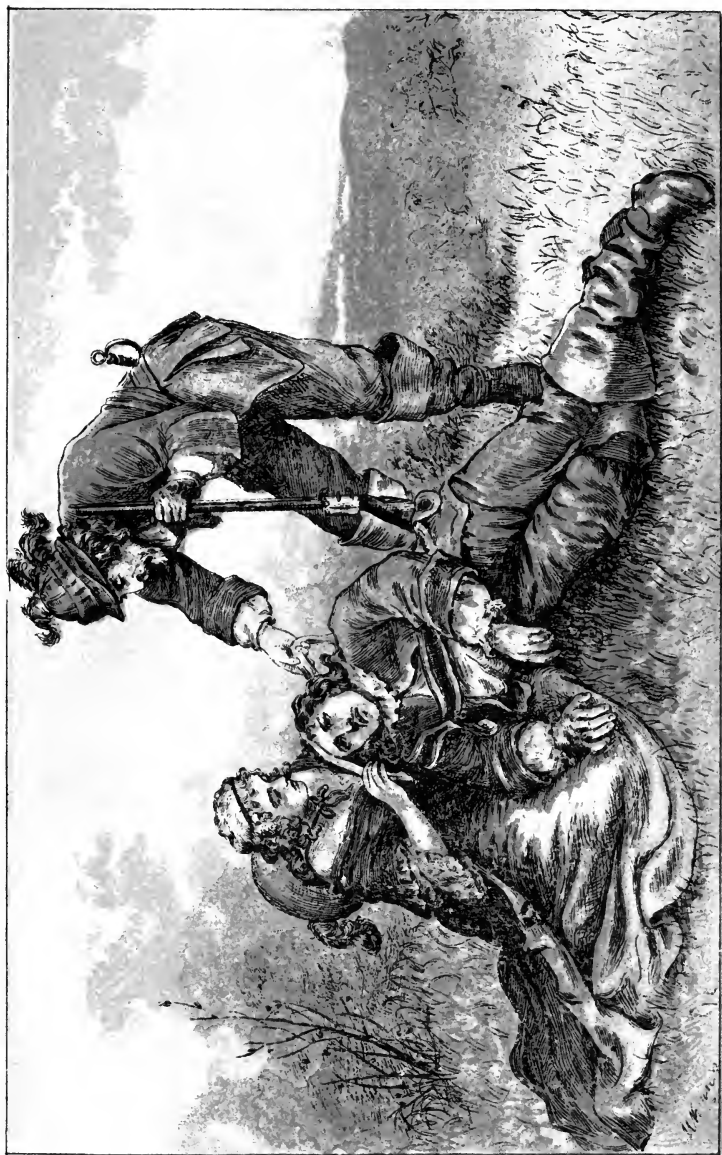


Illustration by J. S. S. Ltd.

still oozed from the wound, and this appeared the only chance that he had not received a mortal injury.

"Madame understands these matters perfectly," observed the grenadier, assisting Louise in adjustment of the bandages with willing fingers, indeed, but clumsy compared with her own. "Madame is of the first force. The coolness of madame is admirable, her touch light and dexterous. If my comrade could only be sensible of her attentions, he would be envied by the whole army!"

Having one arm disabled, she had propped the wounded man's head against her bosom, while she completed the task, deftly enough, with her available hand. The two recruits, opening mouths and eyes, looked on in stupid surprise, casting dismal glances towards the front, when the report of a musket or a field-piece now and again denoted that the work of danger was still going on.

The old grenadier, stroking his grey moustache, surveyed the whole scene with an air of ludicrous complacency. Suddenly, prompt and military, he sprang to attention, and saluted. The recruits, awkward, embarrassed, frightened out of their wits, tried to imitate his motions: a shadow passed between Louise and the sky, while a voice that caused her heart to stop beating exclaimed—

"Look then, gentlemen, are they not well arranged—perfectly grouped? What does it all mean? Are we making comedies on the field of battle? Is this a scene from a play?"

Startled, agitated, yet holding the poor wounded head softly and steadily to her breast, Louise looked up to behold the King's face, stern and flushed with anger, while a certain set smile, she already knew and dreaded, curved itself about his lips.

She was so familiar with his every expression, she read his heart so clearly, that, in spite of the indifference with which

his glance travelled over the pale inanimate face, she was sure he recognised the Marquis de Bragelone in this mangled soldier prostrate at his horse's feet.

"He is dying, sire!" pleaded Louise with beseeching eyes. "My coach is down yonder: leave him to me, and I will take him to the village under my own care."

Louis reined in his horse, throwing his head back haughtily, as was his manner when displeased.

"The soldiers of France are brave," said he, "and can die with decency on the field of honour. The ladies of our court are also brave, it seems; but for a woman, in my opinion, modesty is more becoming than courage. If Madame la Duchesse had asked permission to attend the army as a sick nurse and Sister of Charity, I should have refused point-blank!"

There was pain, both mental and physical, in her face, while, with another imploring look, she murmured, "And I came so far to see you—only to see you, sire!"

"That is the more to be regretted," answered Louis in the same cold, cutting tones, "as Madame la Duchesse has the farther to return. She will retrace her steps at once, and resume her duties with the Queen, whom she will find two days' march in the rear. There is no more to be said. Forward, gentlemen! Madame la Duchesse, I have the honour to wish you good evening!"

Uncovering, and bowing low with a dignified politeness that never forsook him, he rode off at a gallop, while Louise, looking after him through a mist of tears, turned faint and sick at heart. He was angry with her; she had offended him; he would love her no more; perhaps she was never to see him again!

Yet none the less carefully did she support and nurse the wounded man, helping his inanimate form into her carriage, and bringing her charge carefully to the village she had

lately passed, where she placed him in the hands of the hospital department and Sergeant Leroux.

De Bragelone groaned, but never stirred a finger, while they lifted him out; and though he opened his eyes, there was no recognition in their glassy stare.

Again, in her despair, Louise asked if there was any chance of life.

"He is not the sort to be killed by a fillip!" answered the sergeant gruffly, because of a tear that hung in his shaggy eyelashes. He loved his old commander, under whom he had fought out more than one campaign, approving highly of the military spirit that, in whatever rank it served, was determined to remain a soldier of France. "In the head, madame," he added, trying to cheer up, "an injury is not necessarily mortal; for the heart, it is a different affair. But madame, whose beauty must have inflicted so many, understands the nature of such wounds, no doubt. We shall keep him quiet. He has been well bandaged, well succoured; and, if the surgeon will let him alone, I think he may pull through."

"He must want for nothing," replied Louise, pressing a purse into the sergeant's hand. "I would stay and nurse him myself, if I had permission; but his Majesty's commands are not to be disobeyed."

Then she entered the coach and was driven off, leaving Sergeant Leroux bending over his old officer with an air of mingled interest, concern, and perplexity. "Is it so, then?" he murmured; "and, for all the King's displeasure, have they not yet forgotten thee at court? Courage, my little Marquis; there is a spark left in us yet. By my faith, it would be too stupid to die, when so beautiful a lady has the intention of keeping one alive!" So he laid the patient gently down on some straw that strewed the mud-plastered floor of his improvised hospital, between two ghastly com-

panions, one of whom was raving in delirium, and the other silent in death.

Yet, forasmuch as he still remained insensible, De Bragelone was more to be envied than the Duchesse de Vaujour. Travelling back in her coach by the way she came, increasing with every yard her distance from the man she loved so foolishly, and who treated her so ill, the darkness of evening, closing in on the horizon, seemed far less gloomy than the shadows that gathered round her heart.

Was it all over? she asked herself a hundred times. Were men so constituted that an attachment which had once been all in all could fade into indifference and positive dislike? Louis was grievously offended; he had shown it in a manner the most marked, the most brutal. But how? and why? What had she done? Was it so great a crime to have hurried after him, to have undergone the fatigue, the risks, the hardships of campaigning, only to look on his dear face? He must be very weary of her, she thought, if it had come to this. Turning her grievance over in her mind, backwards and forwards, inside and out, nursing it as a woman nurses and fondles a secret sorrow, there came a gleam of comfort, of joy, of hope. He had recognised the Marquis. She, who knew every turn of his face, had no doubt. Might he not have been stung with jealousy to see De Bragelone's head, dead or alive, resting on her bosom? Yes, it might, it *must* be so! His feelings were wounded; his kingly pride outraged. She would plead, explain, beseech, and all would come right. Lovers understand each other so readily. If she could but see him, one look, one word, would be enough.

Ha! what was this? Brigands, an accident, a picket of the army? Voices shouted in the darkness; horses clattered on the stone-paved road; her coach stopped with a

jerk; two dusky figures, cloaked and mounted, appeared at the window; one of these uncovered, the door opened, and, in an instant, Louis, her own Louis, was beside her, seizing her hands, covering them with his kisses, and, she told herself in secret pride and triumph, with his tears!

"Forgive me," he whispered in those sweet tones that this woman, of all others, found so impossible to resist. "I am a brute, a monster. I have galloped five leagues to ask pardon. Louise, my love, my angel, make it up with me, and let us be friends!"

It was the old story. Can there be anything of the spaniel in feminine docility, or does it not rather partake so far of the Divine nature that its greatest happiness is to forgive? With tears and caresses, warm from her heart, Louise accorded her royal lover so full and free a pardon as to persuade both herself and him that she had been the one in the wrong.

Their interview was short and happy. The King must ride back to his soldiers; his horse stood at the coach door. But the fortress was failing; the siege would soon be ended by a capitulation; his Majesty would return to court, to his Louise, the mistress of his thoughts, his affections, his life.

"And we will never quarrel any more?" murmured the young Duchess, while they exchanged a last embrace in the gloom of that spacious six-inside coach.

"Never!" protested the King.

"And you will always love me, as you do now?"

"Always—for life and death!"

"Oh! I am *too* happy. Adieu; no—*au revoir*!"

CHAPTER VI.

A RUN OF LUCK.

“VA-TOUT on the queen! Again! She comes up whenever I want her. By all the virgins of Cologne and elsewhere, I am in luck to-night. That makes two thousand pistoles, Monsieur le Comte.”

“You have been in luck all day,” answered De Guiches, losing heavily in perfect good-humour. “I, for one, offer you my compliments. But, with your permission, I will leave off, and play no more.”

“As you please, Count,” answered Henri le Blanc, now colonel of a regiment of Gardes Françaises, and fairly launched on that career of military ambition in which he hoped to forget all other interests of life.

But for an orifice above the stove, made by a round shot during the day, the room in which these two gentlemen sat seemed little in character with the quarters of a regimental officer on active service before the enemy. It was richly and luxuriously furnished, abounding in carved oak, heavy tapestry, and massive gold plate. A military valise, a brace of horse-pistols, and a riding-cloak testified, indeed, to the avocations of its present occupant; but all other accessories spoke of comfort, plenty, and the security of profound peace. The honest Flemish gentleman and his family, who had abandoned their home to take refuge in Brussels on the approach of danger, might have so far congratulated themselves that their handsome dwelling-house was chosen for

his residence by the colonel, rather than cleared out for a barrack by his regiment.

Henri le Blanc, no less than his guest, the Count de Guiches, loved well to combine the excitement of warfare with the pleasures of high play, good living, and general dissipation. It agreed so entirely with their dispositions, gallant, mercurial, and essentially French, to lead a storming party at daybreak and sit down to four courses and dessert at noon, to exchange champagne suppers and ruinous card-tables for the earth-dug trenches, the silent formation, the stealthy tread, sputtering grenades, stifling smoke, and hand-to-hand confusion of a night attack. They enjoyed it exceedingly, and called it making war *à la Louis Quatorze*.

Count de Guiches filled himself a bumper from the well-spread supper-table.

"To your health, my friend," said he, "and speedy promotion! Oh! it is coming, I can tell you! I was with the King to-day when you carried that accursed horn-work, sword in hand. He took his horse short by the bridle,—you know his way; and what is rare for him, the colour mounted to his very temples. 'By St. Louis,' said he, 'it is a brave stroke! Who is that officer? Colonel le Blanc? What! Henri le Blanc? We must do something for him, if he ever comes out of such a wasps' nest alive!' 'He is fit to be a general of division,' I exclaimed; for in good truth, Henri, you acquitted yourself more than prettily. 'And *you*, I suppose, a marshal of France!' he answered; but I saw he was pleased, and, trust me, it is the kind of thing he never forgets."

Henri looked happy and proud. "That was a funny little quarter of an hour the rogues treated us with!" said he; "but it is the best of such jokes that they are soon over. See, my friend, I had no sooner dismounted to lead the storming party than they killed my covering sergeant, put

two balls in my coat, and one through my hat. The affair was lively, you may take my word for it. We poor devils, down there under that infernal fire, only wondered whether you fine gentlemen of the staff could see us from the top of the hill. It was lucky his Majesty happened to look our way."

"For me, I never took my eyes off you one instant," replied the other. "I said to myself, 'It is the smartest thing of the whole campaign, and I would give my lands in Provence to be amongst them.' No matter; your chance to-day, mine to-morrow! But, Henri, what in the name of madness caused you to return under the work after the guns had been spiked and the recall sounded? Had you lost an arm or a leg, I could understand your going back for it; but, once out of such a furnace with a whole skin, I should have been content to stay where I was."

The other's face turned very grave. His manner was quite simple and natural while he replied—

"You would have done as I did, Count. I went back for the bravest soldier in France."

"Who is that?"

"One whom you and I remember prosperous, gay, distinguished, high in rank, a favourite at court—the Marquis de Bragelone."

"De Bragelone! I thought he was in the Bastille."

"He must have had a narrow escape. He disappeared. None of us knew what had become of him. I received my brevet of colonel in his place. War was declared, the regiment marched; I inspected the men at the first halt, and found the Marquis serving as a private in the ranks."

"Afterwards?"

"I recognised him with a start of surprise. 'My colonel,' he whispered, 'we have changed places; but we shall both do our duty scrupulously, as before. Respect my secret.

If we come face to face with the enemy, it need not be kept for long.' ”

“Did he, then, wish to run his head against a round shot? For my part, I do not understand such sentiments.”

“He was always brave, and careless of life, even for a soldier of France, while he was happy. Since the siege, not a day has passed but he has exposed himself purposely to the fire of the enemy. This morning he ran out the first with a scaling-ladder, and clapped it to the work. It was too short—they are always too short—but he clung tooth and nail till he swung himself over the parapet. They ought to have cut him to pieces inside, for it was two or three minutes before I could follow with my grenadiers. The Gardes Françaises are the best soldiers in Europe, monsieur, but we should never have taken that horn-work without De Bragelone.”

“And was he badly wounded?”

“Not a scratch till the affair ended. We broke down the ramparts, tumbled the guns into the ditch, burned the palisades, and returned to the trenches under a galling fire from the town. I saw him fall, and went back myself to pick him up. I told off four men to take him to the rear; for he still breathed, though he seemed very badly hit.”

“Through the heart?”

“Through the head: that is what gives me hope. You will drink one more glass, Count, before you say good night?”

But Count de Guiches excused himself for the very sufficient reason that he must be in readiness to wait on the King, who had galloped to the rear some hours ago with a single attendant, and who would expect to find him at his post, to take his Majesty's orders, when he returned.

“I shall walk down to the village, then,” said Le Blanc,

wrapping his cloak round him, "and see whether this poor Marquis is alive or dead."

The kind intention was not to be fulfilled. As he passed outside the lines two horsemen, riding into camp at a gallop, were brought up short by the stern challenge of a sentry, followed by the rattle of his firelock as he clapped it smartly to the hip.

"Halt! Who goes there? Advance one, and give the countersign."

"Quick, Montmorency!" whispered Louis—"the countersign! I have forgotten it. That knave will fire in half a minute."

It was the Montmorency who had an impediment in his speech, and "St. Germain's," the word for the night, came anything but glibly off the lips of a stammering man.

The King, whose forgetfulness was probably assumed, laughed heartily; while the sentry, receiving no answer, brought his musket to the shoulder, and took deliberate aim.

The joke might have ended seriously but for the presence of his colonel.

"Steady, you fool!" exclaimed Henri. "Recover arms. It is the King!"

Then he advanced to his Majesty's stirrup, and made excuses with bared head for the too zealous obedience of a young soldier.

"He was right," laughed Louis, who seemed in high good-humour. "Give the rogue a gold piece for each of us, Montmorency. I forgot the word, and you couldn't say it; so we were both in the wrong. Colonel le Blanc, can you tell me where I can get a glass of wine nearer than headquarters? I have ridden three leagues at a gallop, and I am as thirsty as a grenadier."

Only with his army and before an enemy would his Majesty have so far unbent. It was his policy on rare

occasions to affect that freedom and good-fellowship which belongs especially to the camp; but woe to a soldier, of whatever grade, who should presume on the King's familiarity! He was soon made to remember that, so long as each retained his earthly covering, there was an immeasurable distance between every subject in France and Louis Quatorze.

No one knew this better than Le Blanc. His manner would have been less subservient at Fontainebleau or St. Cloud than here, under the guns of a Flemish fortress that he had attacked so gallantly within the last few hours.

"If your Majesty would so far deign to honour me," said he, "my quarters are within a musket-shot; and the Count de Guiches, who supped there, has but just left them to await your arrival. A fresh table shall be laid in five minutes, could your Majesty wait so long."

"By St. Louis, colonel, you understand the art of war," was the cordial reply. "It seems you know how to victual a fortress as well as to take one. I had my eye on you this morning, Colonel le Blanc. I have seen some fighting, and I tell you it was beautifully done."

Henri bowed to the ground.

"A word of approbation from your Majesty," said he, "is the noblest reward a soldier of France can desire."

But the King, fresh from his interview with Louise, had not finished with him yet. He dismounted at the colonel's quarters, and sat down with an excellent appetite to a little supper sent up at a minute's notice, which reflected the greatest credit on the foraging and culinary talents of Henri's soldier-cook. Amongst other dainties were served a brace of quails, broiled, on a silver dish of exquisite workmanship, and constructed to shut up in a small compass, so as to fit a pistol-holster. Such a combination of refinement and warfare was exceedingly to his Majesty's taste.

"Give me that dish," said he, wishing to examine more closely a device he resolved to have imitated.

"And the quails also, if your Majesty will condescend to accept them," exclaimed his ready host.

Louis, with that tact which takes a favour as gracefully as it is offered, thanked him heartily for the gift.

"Your wine is good, colonel," said he, as, having done justice to the meal, he rose to depart; "so good that I will ask for another glass. Fill it up to the very brim—such a bumper as that in which one pledges a comrade. Monsieur le Marquis de la Vallière," he added, standing erect, and looking Henri full in the face, "I drink to your health! Your patent shall be made out at once, and when we return from the campaign you will take that precedence to which your rank will entitle you, no less than your lineage and your services. Enough, monsieur, not a word of thanks. Montmorency, let us get on the horses and go home."

Nor would he suffer the new-made nobleman to accompany him beyond the door, where his horse stood waiting, but waved him a gracious farewell as he cantered away.

Montmorency, with one foot in the stirrup, remained behind to shake Henri by the hand, and offer sincere congratulations on his promotion.

"If they give you a new coat-of-arms," he stammered, "you ought to take for your supporters a brace of—quails."

He got the word out with a bounce, and galloped off through the darkness after the King.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ROBE OF NESSUS.

BUT, in this world of change, promotion, from whatever quarter it may come, fails to afford us the gratification we expected when we served as humble soldiers in the ranks. It is, perhaps, fortunate that men seldom attain their aims till the zest for aggrandisement has somewhat palled. We reach a higher grade, indeed, but many of our companions rise, at the same time, to the same level; and we find ourselves no taller than the others—only carried with them, as on a lift, to an upper floor. The Marquis de la Vallière, assisting in all the gaieties of Paris after his campaign, stood in no better relation to Madame de Montespan than Henri le Blanc to Athénée de Mortemar. Both had achieved honour, rank, notoriety, and both were favourites of the King.

We talk a great deal, we novelists especially, of undying love, invincible constancy, the faith that endureth to the end. But there are attachments and attachments. How many can resist a continual round of folly, dissipation, and fresh excitement, while self-interest pulls hard against self-respect, or expediency, with plausible gestures and persuasive tongue, advises us to accept the common lot, contenting ourselves with the half-loaf that is proverbially better than no bread? “How fond I was of that woman last year!” says a man, looking carelessly after some passing carriage of which the very liveries on the servants’ backs and foot-

fall of the horses once made his heart beat, and his cheek turn pale. "I used to think I liked him," murmurs the lady, among her cushions, considering whether this or the lilac bonnet suits her best; and each stifles a little sigh, not for the other, but rather in self-commiseration, because of the changing, frivolous, world-hardened heart. So, one by one, the petals fall from the rose, till we find nothing left of the flower but a thorn or two on a withered stalk.

The season of campaigning had passed, and the King had returned in triumph to pass the winter at, or in the neighbourhood of, his capital. The weather was severe; ice stood on the Seine several inches thick; snow lay many feet deep in the provinces; the harvest had failed; beasts of prey, frozen out from their forest homes, came down into the villages; and for the starving peasant, literally as metaphorically, "the wolf was at the door!"

What matter? The taxes had been paid from returns of the previous year, and the King thought he was acting like a wise sovereign and father of his people in enlarging his expenditure, and enlivening the gloomy season with the extravagance of his entertainments.

A fashion for driving out in sledges became the rage. Courtiers vied with each other in the taste and workmanship of their gliding vehicles, no less than in the lavish splendour with which they were decorated.

Whatever pursuit or amusement Louis adopted for the time, he expected should be enthusiastically carried out, not only by his household, but by all those whom he distinguished with his notice. The Queen, the Duchesse de la Vallière, as she was now generally called, Madame de Montespan, and other ladies of the court assembled daily on the ice, each attended by her cavalier, whose duty it was to arrange her furs, whisper compliments in her ear, and drive her horses

at speed over the level surface. These ladies were at liberty to name their charioteers; and while Madame de Montespan selected the Marquis de la Vallière for so onerous a duty, it is needless to say that Louise chose the King.

His Majesty seemed not in the best of humours. After a turn or two, during which he complained of the cold, and paid her a few forced compliments, he left Louise to the guidance of her servants, and walked briskly across the ice in the direction taken by Madame de Montespan and her companion.

That lady, contrary to custom, preserved a profound silence, till the speed at which they slid along took them beyond ear-shot of the other courtiers. Then she threw her veil back, and, shooting a keen glance from the dark eyes that glittered like stars in that frosty air, she remarked maliciously—

“Monsieur le Marquis has, no doubt, profited by his promotion, and learned to take things more like a philosopher, and less like a mousquetaire.”

His laugh was so perfectly natural as to send a little shaft of pique and annoyance to her heart. She always meant to dismiss him, of course; but, though the fetters were struck off, the marks ought surely to remain.

“I had a good education,” was his cheerful answer. “He would be a dull scholar who gained nothing from the lessons of madame.”

“You have a noble future before you, Henri—I mean, Monsieur le Marquis,” she continued thoughtfully. “Confess, now, what would you have been at this moment had I not proved the wiser of the two?”

“A simple colonel of the Guard,” he replied; “and I look to *you*, madame, to make me some day a marshal of France.”

“How so?” she asked quickly, irritably, feeling that she

must have lost all hold over him when he could venture such a request, knowing by what means alone it could be granted.

“The King will refuse you nothing—absolutely nothing, Madame la Marquise,” he answered. “In that robe so loose, so flowing, so becoming to your beauty and your figure, he has no alternative.”

The arrow, whether well aimed or shot at random, went true to the mark. Madame de Montespan had indeed designed the fashion of this voluminous garment, for reasons of which she was somewhat proud, yet more than half ashamed.

“Why not use your sister’s influence?” she returned. “Madame de la Vallière is still a pretty woman, and wears a robe like mine.”

She was a practised fencer ; but her thrust, if she meant it for such, struck harmless against the breast-plate of selfishness and ambition in which he was encased.

“My sister’s influence is on the wane,” said he, “and yours, madame, in the ascendant. One must make use of it before it begins to fail.”

“Great heavens, monsieur !” she replied, almost with indignation, “you have taken my lessons more literally than I ever intended. You are a man of honour, a man of distinction ; are you, also, a man without a heart ?”

“I am what madame has made me,” he returned with perfect coolness and good-humour. “In your girlish frocks you liked a mousquetaire. When you put on the coronet of a marchioness, you affected a philosopher ; and, now that you wear this easy-flowing dress, you prefer a king. It is quite simple—a mere question of natural selection and the gradations of animal life. When you are tired of the King——”

She was really angry now, and took him up short.

"I am not tired of him yet!" she said, with flashing eyes and a deepening colour.

"Nor he of you," was the unmoved answer. "Look! he is following across the ice. His Majesty is signing for us to stop."

"Drive on, then! We need not see him."

For one short moment the empire, that she felt had slipped out of her grasp, seemed more precious than the royal conquest she had bartered her whole life to obtain; but Henri was too good a courtier to take advantage of this passing weakness; and it may be, also, that he found a stern and bitter gratification in demonstrating to the woman he once loved how completely he was changed. The horses were pulled up with a jerk; he handed the reins to his companion, jumped from the sledge, and stood in readiness to assist his Majesty to the vacant seat.

Not often in her career of triumphant beauty did it occur to Madame de Montespan to find herself slighted by two admirers in as many minutes. The smile with which she was prepared to greet the King turned to an angry scowl, and she bit her beautiful lips hard, to keep back an exclamation of surprised displeasure, when his Majesty at ten paces from her sledge turned short round, and made off with the utmost haste towards a crowd of people who had gathered at the other extremity of the ice, drawing his sword as he strode along. He sheathed it, however, when he neared the assemblage, and stood aloof to observe the cause of these indecorous proceedings on the part of his people.

It has already been said that the winter was unusually severe, that food was scarce, and bread had risen to a price which meant something very like starvation for the industrious classes. Hundreds of beggars, not from choice, but of necessity, stalked about Paris, gaunt and famished, like the very wolves that after nightfall scoured the streets of

many a provincial town. Haggard women stood in knots about the bakers' shops, folding their lean arms for warmth, but speaking little, because of the cruel hunger that gnawed within; and, saddest sight of all, little children, unnaturally pale and large-eyed, tottered and fell amongst the gutters, or sat upright on door-steps, with vacant, wistful looks that seemed already to have learned the secrets of another world.

Wounded to the quick by the King's coldness and desertion, Madame de la Vallière ordered her servants to drive home without delay. She could not bear to witness the triumph of a rival, and was, indeed, sadly deficient in that obstinate endurance, that thickness of skin, which in all contests, moral no less than physical, is calculated to carry off the prize. Too gentle, too soft of heart, that seemed to her the sting of a scorpion which Madame de Montespan would have ridiculed as the mere bite of a gnat.

But at least it was her nature to feel the woes of others keenly as her own. Passing through the starving crowd on her way home, she could not dissemble her commiseration, and, when they entreated her for alms, emptied her purse to the extent of more than fifty gold pieces, without hesitation, among these suppliants. The gentle blue eyes filled with tears of celestial pity, and the poor hungry people, scrambling for her bounty, told each other this lovely and delicate creature must have been sent down to relieve their necessities from a better world. "Long life to the beautiful lady!" cried one weak, hoarse voice. "Lady!" repeated another, "she is an angel from heaven!" "Neither lady nor angel," protested a rough-looking wood-cutter with an emaciated child on his shoulder, "but a woman, a real woman; and that is better than either!" They shouted, they wept, they laughed, they danced, and crowded round, kissing her hands, her feet, the skirt of her dress, the furs that trailed from her

carriage. In the midst of this turmoil arrived the King, surrounded by some score of his household, to whom he turned with his gravest and most majestic air.

"Gentlemen," said he, "what think ye of Madame de la Vallière and her court? In honest truth she seems to me more nobly royal amongst those ragged wretches than I, Louis, surrounded by my lords and peers of France in satin and cloth of gold. Madame," he added, kissing her hand, and taking his seat at her side, "you are admirable, you are inimitable, but you set us all an example that I, for one, shall follow to the best of my abilities."

With these words he emptied his pockets amongst the crowd, scattering gold pieces right and left for the delighted assemblage.

To copy is the most delicate of all flattery, and a king never wants imitators. One after another the courtiers poured all the money they had about them into the battered hats or squalid hands of the delighted applicants. Not till the last crown was exhausted did the supplications cease, or the crowd disperse, leaving his Majesty at leisure to continue his drive with Madame de la Vallière.

How fresh she looked, and how beautiful, as they sped together once more over the ice through the clear frosty air! Blushing, beaming, triumphant, the deep soft eyes lit up with love and happiness, he wondered how he could have neglected her for another, and vowed, as he had done too often of late, that he would never play her false again. Alas! when it comes to splicing our bonds with resolutions of constancy, they are nearly worn through, and must soon break once for all. In the meantime lover and lady laughed over a scene in which, notwithstanding its touching accessories, the comic element largely predominated, particularly when the courtiers began to follow the example of their master.

"Did you see, Louise," said the King, "how generous these gentlemen grew at a moment's notice? It was only a question of who had the fullest pockets to be the soonest emptied. Why, I noticed Count Haras, who does not even pay his play debts, stripping the gold lace from his coat to force it on a tattered woman with a baby!"

"But you did not, perhaps, notice, sire," answered Louise, with her quiet smile, "that the lace was sham. That coat of the Count's covers more sins than his charity, you may depend!"

The King laughed. "You are charming!" said he; "nothing escapes those soft eyes of yours. Ah, Louise! why are you not always in good spirits, like to-day?"

Why was she not? Why could she not learn at least this lesson from her rival, that an admirer should always be kept amused? When Love begins to yawn, it means that he will very soon go to sleep. Even now she could not refrain from her grievance, touching, as it were, and thus inflaming, the sore place in her heart.

"Can you ask, sire?" she murmured. "Do you not know how I love you? Have I not cause to be often jealous, and always sad?"

He failed to repress a movement of impatience. "It is the same story, over and over again," said he pettishly. "Have you not everything you can desire? In the name of all the saints, Louise, what is it you complain of? I cannot be always tied to your apron-string. Others must be considered. There is the Queen."

"And Madame de Montespan!"

"Nonsense!" he retorted. "What is this silly grudge against Madame de Montespan? Be reasonable, Louise, and let me hear no more of it. You used to be such friends."

"That is the cruel part: we are friends even now."

"Of course you are! I wish you to continue friends."

You are looked on almost as sisters by the whole court. Your carriages, liveries, and appointments are alike. You even wear the same loose kind of dress."

There was but little mirth in the smile with which she answered him :—

"Do you know what I call it, sire? It is my robe of Nessus. Whenever I see hers, or put on my own, something seems to burn and blister, through the skin, into my very heart!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FORTUNE-TELLER.

WHILE winter, all over France, pinched and chilled the poor man, sometimes even fanning him with frozen breath to his last sleep, scene after scene of gaiety and splendour afforded new excitement to the court; scene after scene impressed on Louise de la Vallière a cruel conviction that she was no longer the first and only object of interest for the King.

Love, especially the love of woman, rarely exists without jealousy; and the gentlest natures, those least disposed to publish their wrongs, often suffer most from that distemper of the mind, to which no other moral torture can be compared.

Day by day, Madame de Montespan was gradually, but surely, weaning the King's affections from their early home; but her tact was so exquisite, her nature so wary, her self-command so invincible, as to deceive the most acute observers of the court. The injured Queen herself, perplexed, agitated, and unhappy, failed to perceive the real truth, and visited on Madame de la Vallière a neglect that originated with the attractions of another. It cut poor Louise to the heart when, after spending an evening of anxiety and a night of despair, because of the King's absence and her ignorance of his movements, she found herself next day subjected to as black looks and cutting sarcasms as if she had been alone to blame for his Majesty's desertion of his outraged and offended consort. How often, in her loneliness, her repentance, her shame, did

she bewail the one sin and error of her life, deploring in tears of blood faults that arose in the weakness rather than the depravity of her nature, longing so wearily for that pure happiness, that calm content, which can only be enjoyed by a soul at peace with Heaven and itself! However sweet those pastures where it browses, the poor lost sheep knows only too well with what sickness of heart, what insatiable desire, it yearns for the shepherd and the fold.

Again and again did she vow to put an end to all these sorrows and humiliations by entering a house of religion, and dedicating to Heaven the rest of a life she had wasted too lavishly on an earthly shrine. Again and again her better nature yielded, her pious resolutions vanished, at a glance or a smile from the King.

But the glances and smiles grew scarcer and colder every day. How it galled her to feel that he had *loved* her once, that he only *liked* her now; that she sometimes even wearied him; that she had detected him swallowing a yawn—worse, smothering a sigh—at her very side!

And all the while Athénée, lively, heart-whole, self-confident, was winning as she pleased. No fear that the King's spirits should stagnate in *her* society. Not a moment's leisure was given him to yawn, and anything so sentimental as a sigh she would have ridiculed for a week. Every hour brought its fresh amusement, its new distraction, and in each varying mood and humour Madame de Montespan seemed always at her best.

In her apartments were held the gayest little supper-parties, were passed the pleasantest evenings at court; and here, as if her triumph were incomplete without the greater abasement of her rival, she would invite the Duchesse de la Vallière, with many protestations of affection and good-will. What sacrifice will not a woman make for the man she loves? Louise, pale, trembling, dejected, assisted at these immola-

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tions of her own self-respect, as she would have put her hand in the fire, or gone through any other ordeal, to please the King.

One evening, when the circle was at its merriest, their handsome hostess came forward and made a profound curtsy to Louis in the midst.

"Sire," said she, "so great a king as your Majesty is independent of destiny in war. This we have lately seen with our own eyes; but in love it is quite a different thing. Would you like to have your fortune told?"

"By *you*, madame, certainly!" answered the King, lightly enough, though every syllable sent its stab to a gentle heart that throbbed and suffered within two paces. "You are handsome as the Sibyl, and one should indeed be a true prophet when one has but to relate the past!"

She smiled, and tossed her head.

"I do not meddle with such matters," said she. "For me the past and the future have no existence. Let us live in the present. Behold, sire, my people gave alms to a gypsy to-day at the gate; they were impressed, even frightened, by her knowledge of their private affairs. I bade them engage her for this evening to amuse and enliven us. She is at the door now."

"Tell her to come in," said his Majesty; adding, as an after-thought, for perhaps his heart reproached him that he had neglected her the whole night, "if Madame de la Vallière has no objection. She used to be afraid of these witches and necromancers: she was never a follower of the Black Art."

"I have got over that weakness, sire," replied Louise, smiling rather bitterly. "Those who have done with hope have done with fear."

Though the last words were only whispered, the King looked provoked, and turned coldly away.

In the meantime, a tall woman, dressed in Eastern fashion, and wearing a *yashmak*, or veil, that concealed all her face but a pair of dark and piercing eyes, strode haughtily into the room. Making obeisance neither to King nor courtier, she took up her position apart, in a recess formed by the stove, and motioned with her arm as if to ward off intrusion or familiarity from the company.

"There is too much light!" exclaimed Madame de Montespan, whose dramatic instincts rose to the occasion. "Take away some of those candles. We are not children, I think, to be frightened in the dark. Now, ladies, let us set a brave example to the gentlemen. Who will venture first to have her fortune told?"

In the half-light—for Athénée's orders were speedily obeyed—the tall gypsy looked a picturesque, mysterious, and somewhat forbidding object. Those black eyes shone with unearthly brightness; that calm attitude, firm and motionless as a statue, seemed suggestive of the repose that lies beyond the grave.

Some of the ladies tittered, some trembled, but nobody seemed inclined to venture, as Madame de Montespan said, "into the wolf's mouth," so that she was obliged herself to take the initiative, offering her palm to the prophetess with a haughty smile that well became the turn of her proud head and erect bearing of her stately beauty.

"My fortune is in my own hand," said she scornfully; "even you gypsies admit so much. Do you think I cannot hold it there, and guide it to my own purpose?"

The gypsy's voice had not yet been heard. Low and deep, it thrilled the nerves of every listener in the room; yet, to Louise, there seemed something familiar in the earnest tones that replied—

"The head to guide the hand; the hand to serve the head. Beautiful lady, that must always prove the winning game.

But head and hand alone are not enough to weave the web of a woman's destiny. What of the heart?"

"I have none," was the answer; "I lost mine long ago." Incorrigible coquette that she was, Athénée could not forbear shooting a glance from her dark eyes at the Marquis de la Vallière ten yards off, received with perfect equanimity by Henri, and intercepted, not without uneasiness, by the King.

"May he prove worthy of it who found so priceless a treasure!" replied the gypsy, with edifying gravity. "In the meantime, madame, permit me to peruse the lines of this beautiful hand. I read pride; I read ambition; I read a worship of self, that marches recklessly over the happiness and the interests of others. Shall I read on?"

"Turn the page," she answered carelessly, "and let us hear it all out to the end."

"Madame will overleap every obstacle, will be turned from her purpose by no difficulties; she will attain the highest object of her ambition, the dearest wish of her heart, and, having gained it, will find it has lost its value and its charm. A diamond may sparkle bravely, though it be but paste; and many a crown that shines like gold is only tinsel after all. Madame accepts her destiny with a merry jest, a mocking lip, and a careless smile; but none the less will she mourn in secret for the path she has chosen, and wish the past undone. Have I said enough?"

"Quite enough for *me*," was the gay rejoinder; "it is the turn of some one else. Madame la Duchesse, will you not submit your future to the reading of this ill-omened prophetic? Don't refuse, dear," she added in an under-tone. "I grant you it is very tiresome, but it amuses the King."

Louise stepped forward unwillingly enough, and offered a timid little hand to the gypsy, who accepted it with a far greater show of deference than had been accorded to the hostess of the evening. The fortune-teller's frame shook

from head to foot as it bowed reverentially before the young Duchess, and the low, deep tones quivered with an emotion not to be repressed.

Louise, too unhappy to feel shy, spoke first. "My fortune," said she, "rather I ought to say my fate, has been long ago decided. If there is anything left for me, of good or evil, tell it at once."

"Turn to the light," replied the gypsy; "let me look into those blue eyes that could never mock, nor threaten, nor deceive. I read in them a history unwritten in the lines of this soft and gentle hand. It is but the history of a flower: modest, shrinking, fragrant, and like themselves in hue."

"Prettily said!" exclaimed the company. "By my faith, this is a gypsy of merit—well instructed and well bred."

Thus encouraged, the fortune-teller spoke in a louder voice. "It is short and sad, my history of the violet. She bloomed at sunrise; she was gathered in the morning; she was flung down on the lawn, faded, crushed, and broken, before noon. Then a blue-eyed child ran by, and wept for the fate of the violet; and a king, walking in the garden, chid the child for weeping, because it is not fit that sorrow or sadness, or reverse of any kind, should stand face to face with royalty. But presently an angel passed through, and comforted the little one; drying its tears, and bidding it lift the bruised flower from the earth, gently and tenderly, to take the place prepared for it among the flowers of heaven. That is the tale I read in the blue eyes of mademoiselle—pardon, I mean of Madame la Duchesse; but on her white hand I trace the lines of many a conflict with self, many a defeat from others. Those who have most power shall press hardest on this yielding nature; and when it turns, rather in sorrow than anger, to protest against injury or injustice, it shall find its worst enemy in its own familiar friend."

The Duchesse de la Vallière had not lived so long at court without learning the usages of good society, or knowing exactly where amusement should stop short of instruction, and how irksome a jest becomes when clumsily developed into earnest. She smiled brightly, therefore, and spoke gaily, while her heart ached to acknowledge the truth of the gypsy's parable.

"I cannot believe," said she, "that I am the object of so many plots and intrigues, or that I am paid the compliment of being so generally hated as you infer. What have I done to incur all this obloquy? You shall tell my past, if you please, as well as my future; and at any rate, if my friends are to become such enemies, surely amongst my enemies I shall be able to count some friends."

The King, who had looked impatient and annoyed during the fortune-teller's ill-omened forebodings, thanked her with an approving smile for thus making light of the whole affair, and Louise felt as if a gleam of sunshine was once more brightening her existence. She glanced timidly in his face, and mustered courage to murmur, "I believe nothing of these predictions, sire. My destiny is in the keeping of one who has shown himself above all the turns of fortune and of fate."

Flattery was always to the King's taste; none the less when, as in the present instance, it came direct from the heart. "I am pleased to hear you say so," he whispered, bending close to her ear till the abundant silken tresses brushed his cheek. "Dear Louise, there is no love without confidence; and, if you could but place reliance on the word of a prince, it would be better both for you and for me."

"Ah, sire!" she answered, blushing, "I only am in fault. Forgive me, forgive me; you make me so happy when you speak like that."

"Will your Majesty give permission to dismiss the fortune-teller?" said Madame de Montespan, using without scruple

her rights of hostess to break in on an interview of which her friend's deepening eyes and rising colour too plainly discovered the purport. "For my part, I think she is tiresome enough, though she paid as many compliments to Madame de la Vallière as if she had been a musketeer in disguise. I only wait your leave, sire, to bid them show her the door."

The words were deferential enough; but in Athénée's manner, even in the tone of her voice, there lurked a something of audacity and recklessness which, perhaps from the force of contrast, was exceedingly fascinating to the King. While with Louise he tasted a sweet and soothing repose, Athénée caused him to laugh and frown, feel irritated and amused, alter his mind and change his mood, twenty times in a minute. The society of the one was like water and sunshine; of the other, like wax-lights and wine.

Already weary of pleasure, satiated with success, need we say in which the jaded nature took most delight? When he saw Madame de la Vallière looking pale, unhappy, and dejected, his heart would smite him, because of the true unselfish love that made her so miserable, and was given him without scruple or reserve. Then he would force himself to speak soft words, to lavish fond attentions; and Louise would be persuaded, for the hundredth time, that she was foolish, jealous, exacting; that his pursuit of another was only transitory, frivolous—the result of manner and politeness; that she alone understood him, and possessed the key of his secret heart. With such reflections she made herself perfectly happy, till some new infidelity, some fresh outrage—neither concealed nor extenuated—plunged her once more into the lowest depths of despondency, and she would wish from her soul that she was dead.

"He might be sorry then," thought the poor wounded, quivering heart. "He might love me, perhaps, as he used, if he knew that he was never, *never* to see me again!"

And so the penance was undergone. If there be any truth in the doctrine which teaches that suffering, accepted humbly and patiently, can atone for sin, then must the gentle, sorrowing spirit of Louise de la Vallière have expiated its guilt fully and freely in the purgatory of this world long before it stood on the threshold of the next.

The Count de Guiches, disguised as a gypsy fortune-teller for the amusement of an idle hour, little thought how apt were his metaphors, or how surely his prophecies would come true.

CHAPTER IX.

DREAMING ON.

HUMAN nature is loth to believe in ruin, complete and irremediable. It takes a long time before we can be brought to acknowledge the hopelessness of a mortal disease; and when we build a house on foundations of sand, many a storm must blow, many a flood rise, to convince us that the next shock will bring it tumbling about our ears. Months, and even years, elapsed during the struggle sustained by Louise de la Vallière with her misgivings, her disappointments, her desolation; but during that weary time of trouble, in a heart furrowed by the iron of affliction, watered by tears of despair, germinated the seed that, sown in sorrow, should hereafter come to maturity in the goodly tree of sincere and practical repentance, by which a sinner climbs at last to heaven.

Her ascent seemed slow and gradual enough. Who shall say how often it was interrupted by the very hand that first dragged its victim through the mire—by the woman's weaknesses that rendered her so loving and so beloved? how often it was assisted by those unworthy regrets, worldly and of the world, that raised to heaven eyes dim and weary with the mocking shadows or the pitiless glare of earth? Not always is the better part chosen for its own sake. Regardless of the happy hearth within, it is too often but stress of weather from without that drives the wanderers for shelter to their only refuge; and yet, come thickly as they will, there is room and to spare; purple-robed or loathsome with rags, each and all find a welcome and a home.

In the affections as in the fortunes of mankind, ebb and flow seem to succeed each other with a regularity that minute and constant observation might almost tabulate to a nicety. Up to-day, down to-morrow, the lover and his mistress play at seesaw till the plank breaks, and both come to the ground in a tumble that disgusts them for a time with their hazardous amusement. Louise had more than her share of these vicissitudes. Now the King would treat her, in face of the whole court, with an indifference so marked, so unkind, yet so freezingly polite, that she could hardly refrain from tears; anon, perhaps because his conscience pricked him, he would lavish on her in public the most distinguished marks of favour. And woe to those who, taking their cue from his Majesty's past demeanour, should offer any slight to her dignity, or presume to dispute precedence with the woman whom, if he had ceased to worship her, he still on occasion delighted to honour!

Even Madame de Montespan dared not venture too far. Once hazarding an ill-natured remark in his hearing, to the effect that "Mademoiselle de la Vallière had lately grown so thin as to have lost that roundness of bust and arms which had been her greatest beauty," she was reduced to abject submission by the severity of his reproof.

"You have been long enough at court, madame," said the angry monarch, "to have learned, and too long if you do not yet know, that here we cannot recognise Mademoiselle de la Vallière. I am acquainted with none of that name, though Madame la Duchesse de Vaujour is a loved and honoured friend of yours and mine!"

Athénée, biting her lips, vowed to make both of them pay dearly for her mortification.

There was but one thread of hope to which poor Louise clung, one faint gleam of comfort in which she sunned her storm-beaten breast, looking to it as the promise of a fairer

time. Though the King was often reserved, and almost always weary, even when alone with her, yet under any sudden reverse, disappointment, or affliction it was to her that he came for sympathy and consolation. "Let others share his joys," she would say to herself; "so long as he keeps his sorrows for me, I am not quite indifferent to him. He cannot love *her* best, or when he is really unhappy he would never come here."

Her! It had arrived at that! She tried hard to deceive herself, and still concealed from others the conviction that Athénée had stolen away all the treasure of her life. No doubt—for was she not a woman?—she reproached the King in private, and took him to task pretty roundly for an infidelity she insisted on hearing him deny; thereby, with sad want of skill, playing into the hand of an adversary who never made such mistakes, and would have quarrelled with all her admirers outright rather than suffer one to feel fatigued or ill at ease in her society. Yet, standing face to face, as it were, with the corpse of her dead love, she hesitated to lift its shroud, and thus convince herself that the white and rigid features would never smile back to her again.

Like one who wakes with the vague sense of a great calamity, and tries by prolonging slumber to postpone misery, entire consciousness was only a question of time.

In the midst of gaiety, dissipation, and intrigue, Madame was suddenly taken ill. The grim tax-gatherer, who knocks at all doors alike, called for his dues at St. Cloud, with little ceremony and no intention of forbearance or reprieve. Surprise, consternation, and dismay pervaded the court. It seemed so strange, so ill advised, so disobliging, that one of their own immediate circle should insist on being mortal, like the lower classes and gentry of the provinces. Such an anomaly was hard to explain; and rather than admit that a

princess enjoyed no royal exemption from the common lot, society imputed to an innocent, if an indifferent, husband the crime of poisoning his wife. This scandal—hinted, whispered, promulgated—received at last so much credence out of doors that Monsieur was hooted, insulted, and pelted with filth by those exquisite arbiters of morality, a Parisian mob.

In the meantime Madame grew worse. The doctor shook his head, and talked of the priest. It became a question of extreme unction, the *viaticum*, and form of prayer for those in the agony of death.

With all her own cares to occupy her, the Duchesse de la Vallière, who never forgot her friends, could even find sorrow, sympathy, and forgiveness for those who had chosen to become her enemies. While that suffering princess lay on her death-bed, it was no time to recall the covert sarcasms, the open insults, of her prosperous days; and in the whole court of France none prayed for her welfare here and hereafter more sincerely than the woman she had once so persecuted and maligned.

After an hour spent in such devotions, weary, worn out, rather envying than pitying one about to be at rest in the grave, Louise lay down to sleep, and was soon sunk in that profound insensibility which kind nature accords as the remedy for depression of spirits and prolonged anxiety of mind. From this heavy stupor, more like a trance than the lassitude of natural repose, she woke up with a start, terrified, speechless, paralyzed, an indefinable dread, a strange sense of the supernatural, curdling her blood, and arresting the action of her heart. She tried to leap out of bed, but her limbs refused to move; she would have cried aloud, but her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth. She kept her eyes on the solitary night-lamp with a gaze fixed and fascinated as that of a bird or a rattlesnake. When the flame leaped

up in its socket, glimmered, and went out, the fear that came over her seemed enough to drive her mad. Presently a violet spark, rising, as it were, from the floor, brightened and widened into a pale sheet of light, disclosing a bier covered with a white cloth, whereon was laid a draped and shrouded figure, having at its head the crown of a princess of France, and bunches of roses mixed with lilies disposed about its feet. Under the folds of those drooping grave-clothes, it could be seen that the hands were crossed on the bosom as if in prayer.

Two angels stood beside the corpse, one sad and sorrowing, the other stern, though full of pity. This last held a book of tablets in his hand.

"They are set down here," said he, "and their name is Legion. The balance is cast, the reckoning made. There is nothing left but to pay the penalty."

"Compare them once more, my brother," was the answer. "Surely there is repentance on the opposite side."

"One minute of repentance for each year of sin," replied the first in solemn and reproving tones. "Cast it up thyself, my brother; it is not me thou hast to blame!"

"And she must be condemned?"

"She must be condemned!"

The more pitiful of the two seemed to ponder, while tears dimmed the light of heaven in his eyes. Presently, with a bright and holy smile, he laid his hand on the cold, dead brow.

"And the ransom?" said he.

The other shook his head. But Louise, with a supreme effort to repeat the words, and throw herself in supplication at his feet, broke the spell, and awoke.

All was dark and solitary. Scared like a frightened child, she caught the bell in both hands, and never ceased ringing till it was answered by her waiting-maid.

"What is it, Madame la Duchesse?" exclaimed that astonished young person, rushing to the bed in such a déshabillé as at any other time would have roused a smile. "Say, then, quick! Have your curtains caught fire?"

"No, no!" was the reply. "That is the strangest part of all. There was no light in the room till you brought your candle. I would ask you to fetch some more, but you must not leave me. I could not bear to be alone for a moment."

"But what has happened, then, madame?" asked the shivering waiting-maid. "There is nothing to make one afraid. Madame must have had a dream, an indigestion, a nightmare."

For answer, Louise asked another question. "Before you went to bed, was there any better account of Madame?"

The girl shook her head. "I was told, at ten o'clock, Madame was sinking every moment."

"Then put my petticoat there round your shoulders. Give me that book from the shelf, and let us pray together for her soul."

So the two women spent their night in prayer; and, when morning broke, one of them, at least, was not surprised to learn that Henrietta of England, Duchesse d'Orléans, and sister-in-law to the King of France, had been dead some hours.

Louis, in whom the family affections were as yet only partially exhausted, could not but entertain kindly feelings for a relative who always professed unbounded admiration of his person and character. He felt the blow sharply enough to turn for consolation, as usual, to Madame de la Vallière. Arrived at her apartments while she was completing her morning toilet, the King, who had been awake most of the night, looked weary and careworn. It thrilled her heart with joy to think that again, in his affliction, he should turn, not to Madame de Montespan, but to *her*. She never asked



Vincent Brooks Day & Son. Lith.

herself whether she was selfish enough to wish him always in trouble, so that he might be always her own ; but at least *she* could have welcomed any sufferings, mental or bodily, to strengthen the fragile bonds that united her with the man she loved.

It seemed like old times to kneel before him with her elbows on his knee, and serve him with a cup of chocolate, his usual refreshment at this hour. In the joy of his presence—alas ! only the more prized for its rarity—her smiles brightened, her spirits rose, her fears and anxieties vanished like mists before the sun.

It was not long before she told him her dream, the fright she had sustained, and the prayers she offered up, on waking, for Madame's departing soul.

"It is strange, more than strange," said the King, pondering. "Louise, there must be some mysterious sympathy between you and me."

"Did you ever doubt it, sire ?" she replied, nestling to his side like a child. "If you were sorrowing, at however great a distance, I am sure I should know it, and feel unhappy too !"

"It must be the same with me," said Louis. "How else can I account for what happened last night ? I had lain down to rest after a painful interview with Monsieur, in which my brother behaved, now like a baby, now like a madman, giving orders that if any change took place in his wife's state, for better or worse, I should be aroused at once. Tired out in body and mind, I was soon asleep ; but my repose could not have lasted many minutes before I woke with a strange feeling of horror, benumbing all my faculties, and taking from me the power of motion, even of speech. I tried to leap up and call out, but my limbs seemed paralyzed, and my tongue tied."

"Precisely the case with me," interrupted Louise, "only

that, to increase my terror, the lamp went out, and left me in the dark."

"So did mine," replied the King. "For an instant I doubted whether I was not in the tomb. Like a dead man, I could neither stir nor see, and wondered whether this was a state of the soul's transition, or must last for all eternity. Presently, a drop of water, soft and warm like a tear, fell on each cheek, and I sprang to my feet. The charm was dispelled. I summoned my people to light the candles and discover whence these rain-drops came. They examined the roof, the ceiling, the curtains of the bed; all were weather-proof and dry. Moreover, the night was clear and fine. In an hour arrived one of my gentlemen from St. Cloud, with the news that Madame had passed away. Louise, dear Louise, what are we to think of such things as these?"

"They are the links, sire, that connect us with the spirit-world: I believe in them most implicitly."

He shook his head.

"You believe in so much, Louise; you are so credulous, so easily deceived."

She could not resist the opportunity. So anxious was she for its endurance, so apprehensive of its weakness, that she wore her chain out in efforts to test its strength. There is a deep moral in the forbearance of Don Quixote, when, having once mended his cloven helmet of pasteboard and pack-thread, he abstained from proving it again.

"I should be very unhappy were it otherwise," said she. "Ah me! I often ask myself, am I not living in a fool's paradise after all?"

He repressed the impatience which custom had now taught him to keep back.

"A fool's paradise!" he repeated. "It is something to have gained a paradise of any kind. And the abode of

bliss, where is it? At St. Germain's, Versailles, Fontainebleau, St. Cloud?"

"It is wherever I behold your majesty. *You* make the paradise, sire; for, when you smile, I am happy."

"And do I make the fools also, Louise?"

"Ask your own heart, sire. Do you not often play me false? Do I not force myself daily to ignore that which would break my heart if I admitted its truth? It does not follow that a woman must be blind because she *will* not see."

"Nor that there is shape and substance in shadows thrown by the false light of jealousy and caprice. Enough of reproach, Louise; you and I have to make the best of a false position. We live in an atmosphere of restraint, of dissimulation: one must learn to breathe it, or die. Some consideration is due to the Queen."

"And to Madame de Montespan, and to other ladies, and to everybody—but *me*!"

"You are different. Come what may, I can always depend on *you*."

The loving heart leaped with joy. It was ever so: a kind word conquered her; and the whole plea, complaint, remonstrance, and appeal, must be put off to another time. Her bright smile attested its sincerity while she made her declaration of faith.

"I love you dearly, and you know it. If you were to kill me, it would be just the same!"

He was getting up to go, for she was pacified; and had he not all he wanted? So, pressing his lips to her forehead, he took an affectionate farewell.

"Do not judge me too hastily," said he; "neither by looks, nor words, nor bearing. Remember, Louise, that at court we live, all of us, in glass houses!"

"Too true," she murmured; "and a good many of us are sadly given to throwing stones!"

CHAPTER X.

A LAST APPEAL.

"AND you have no intention of marrying Monsieur de Lauzun?"

"I have no intention of marrying any one."

He had done with hope and fear, yet there came a look of trouble in the questioner's dark eyes, and his emaciated face turned pale.

"It was your brother who told me. I informed him I should see you just once again—just once again—and he implored me, if I had any influence, to use it for the furtherance of this project."

"Do you speak for yourself or for my brother?"

"How can I speak for myself? I spoke once too often, I think. You see what I am now—a man who has no part in the things of this world—loves, marriages, follies, the mockery of happiness. Believe me, Louise, I have found the only true joy—the priceless treasure of calm content and peace."

How much soever his soul may have benefited, it had done his body no good. Even Louise could scarcely believe those wasted limbs, those drawn, attenuated features, were all that remained of the gay and gallant De Bragelone, whose career began so favourably, and ended so fatally, under the displeasure of his sovereign. Only the dark eyes were left, and they glared with unearthly fire.

She turned on him a look of pity, tender, sad, and sympathizing, yet not the least akin to love.

"Should you have recognised me?" he asked after a pause, during which Louise had been vaguely reflecting on the relation in which she stood to this man, who, as it seemed, voluntarily cut himself off from all human ties.

"You look as you did when I left you with Sergeant Leroux," she replied, trying to give the conversation a livelier turn. "Only there is this much gained—you could neither speak nor move then, and you can do both as well as ever now."

"Well enough, at least, to show my gratitude; and yet, Louise, I have sometimes been so wicked, so desperate, as to wish you had never succoured me—to wish those honest grenadiers had left me under the redoubt to die. I am wiser at last; I have chosen the better part. I have come here from the grave, expressly to bid you follow my example."

She looked uneasily at the bell, and was glad to hear her Swiss porter moving in the passage outside.

"From the grave," he repeated. "In the regiment I have joined, a man inscribes himself at once on the roll of the Dead. From the moment he belongs to the Order I have chosen, he enters a living tomb. When I leave your hotel, madame, I repudiate every attribute of humanity, every phase of life, except its penance and its gloom. From this day, till I am laid in the bed that to-morrow I begin to scoop out of the earth with my own hands, I shall never speak another word aloud, nor lift mine eyes from the ground again."

She understood him too clearly. "You have not become a monk of La Trappe?" she exclaimed, clasping her hands in horror, as well she might.

There prevailed a frightful story in French society at this period, the truth of which was attested by persons of credit and veracity. It was said that the Abbé of Rancy entertained a sincere attachment for Madame de Monbazon.

Returning from a journey, he hastened, as usual, to the residence of his ladye-love, went at once to her apartment without meeting any of her household, and found, on entering the well-known room, no smiling mistress advancing to welcome him with kindly looks and outstretched hands, but the lady's head severed from her body, and grinning on a salver by its side! She had died during his absence. A coffin had been made which proved too short for the corpse, and this ghastly dismemberment was the result. Many men have gone mad for less. If the Abbé's brain withstood the shock, at least it affected the whole of his subsequent career, and drove him from the world. He conceived the project of reforming and reconstituting the Monastery of La Trappe. So rigidly did he carry out his intention, that its very name has become synonymous with the death-in-life of a profound and irremediable despair.

The Trappist, like other monks, has done with the affections of humanity; but he has also renounced the ties that bind mankind to that common nature which is the mother of all. He must never lift his eyes from earth; he must never speak above his breath. While Franciscan and Cistercian, black friar and grey, may water the garden, or prune the fruit-trees, or exchange a kindly good morrow with sinners as well as saints, the Trappist's thoughts must never be diverted from his own dissolution: his solitary recreation is to prepare the bed in which he shall be laid for his last sleep.

Louise looked at her visitor with a painful interest not devoid of self-reproach, wondering whether his heated brain had been affected by the crash of that musket-ball which so nearly quieted it once for all.

"A monk of La Trappe!" He pronounced the words with infinite relish, as though they expressed a wild intensity of resolve, an exaggerated enthusiasm, he would

fain have tempted her to share. "Yes, it is thus men climb to heaven. Louise, Louise, will you not be persuaded to follow where I lead? Have you not sorrows to deplore, sins to expiate; a past to mourn, a future to obtain? What have you to lose? Are you happy now?"

She smiled sadly enough. "Nobody is happy," she replied. "Are *you*?"

"It is no question of *me*. I belong as little to your world as a man who died last year. The only human interest I have left is the welfare of one whom I remember a blue-eyed girl, so pure, so simple, so guileless, singing like some innocent young bird in the gardens of Château de Blois. Louise, do you ever sing now? Has Madame de Vaujour any recollection of Mademoiselle de la Vallière? The Duchess sits on a tabouret in the presence-chamber to-day: where will she sit when souls are released from purgatory, and the final division is made between the blessed and the lost? You are a believer, madame; look me straight in the eyes and answer me that question, if you dare!"

She hid her face in her hands, sobbing violently. "Spare me," she murmured, "spare me! I loved him so dearly, and I never cared for anybody else!"

There were joints even in the armour of La Trappe. He winced like a man pierced to the quick. "Will that excuse serve," said he, "when the recording angel takes down his book, and reads from its eternal page the sins entered against the name of Louise de la Vallière? She came of Christian parents; she was well educated, brought up as a good Catholic; she attended high mass; she gave in alms that which she did not want; she wore purple and fine linen; she fared sumptuously every day; she was a duchess at the court of France, and a king's——"

"Hold, for the love of Heaven!" exclaimed the broken-

hearted woman. "I have sinned; I am lost. My own soul condemns me: what shall I do to return to the right way?"

"If your hand had offended," he replied, while his form dilated and his eye blazed in an access of religious fervour, "would you scruple to cut it off and cast it from you? Shall the heart be spared, because it is that organ which has tempted you to perdition? No; a thousand times no. Rend it out of your bosom; lay it bleeding and quivering before the altar. Offer to Heaven, humbly, freely, without a grudge, without a murmur, that which is more precious than life itself, and doubt not you shall have your reward. Look at *me*, Louise: have I not done so myself?"

"That is very true," she pleaded; "but then, Monsieur le Marquis, you—you had nothing to give up."

"And you have everything!" he returned. "So much the better; so much greater the sacrifice, so much costlier the offering. Ah, Louise! can you see that crucifix on your wall, and yet calculate the gain and loss of a few short years in the court of France?"

She was convinced: she was penitent. He had enlisted her feelings, and won his cause. There is no saying—for religious enthusiasm is of all excitement the most contagious—to what she might have pledged herself, when her attention was diverted from De Bragelone's appeal on behalf of her eternal welfare by voices in the passage, now shriller, now deeper, raised as in high altercation; by a rustling of garments, a scuffling of feet, and something that sounded very like a box on the ear. Immediately the door was flung open, and Madame de Montespan, haughty, defiant, flushed with anger, yet more than half inclined to laugh, sailed into the room.

"Pardon, Madame la Duchesse," she observed with a stately curtsy. "When that insolent animal there refused

me admittance, I had no idea you were so pleasantly engaged."

The Swiss porter, who was holding his hand ruefully enough on the cheek that yet tingled from the buffet her impatience had not been ashamed to administer, excused himself with much simplicity.

"Pardon, Madame la Duchesse," said he also; "have I not your own directions that when this lady calls you are never to be at home?"

With all his gravity, the young Trappist could not repress a smile; with all his courage, the old soldier shrank from taking part in an encounter between two irritated ladies. The door stood open, and De Bragelone made his escape.

"Is this true, madame?" asked Athénée, flinging a look of bitter hatred at the friend she once loved so dearly; "or does the Duchesse de Vaujour thus deny herself only when she receives the Marquis de Bragelone? Make him my excuses, madame, I implore you, that I did not recognise him at once. He is sadly altered in face, figure, and dress. Pardon, madame, that I have interrupted an interview with your new director—shall I say it?—or your old lover."

More often sinned against than sinning, that gentle spirit seldom asserted itself; but Louise was angry now, as well she might be, and showed it.

"All this is clear enough, madame," said she, "and it is simply waste of time to dissemble or deny. You will excuse me, Madame la Marquise, from returning a visit that I have neither solicited nor desired."

Athénée bit her lips, and tossed her head.

"Really, madame," she replied, "as you please! Thank Heaven, I am not so destitute of friends as to inflict my society where it is unwelcome. Perhaps Madame la Duchesse will find this out to her cost. I have the honour to take my leave. I am

too late already, for I promised the King to be with him an hour ago. How he will laugh when I tell him about the Swiss! Louise, reflect one moment. Is it war to the knife?"

It might have been the mere wantonness of power that scorned a vanquished enemy; it might have been the promptings of her better nature that moved her to compassion for a former friend; but Athénée's voice was softer, her bearing less offensive, while she spoke the last sentence, and she came back a pace, as if to give the other an opportunity of accepting the olive-branch thus ungraciously tendered at last.

Women's tongues are sharper than swords. That taunt about the King struck Louise to the heart, and it was with difficulty she summoned strength and courage to stand upright. She made shift, however, to sweep her rival a haughty curtsy, to repeat her own words, "war to the knife," with a steady voice, even to preserve an attitude of firmness and dignity, till the door closed; then she sank on a sofa, utterly disheartened and overcome.

It was not her nature to live in an atmosphere of strife. It made her miserable to be at variance even with those who used her ill; and jealousy itself, of which she felt the pangs so cruelly, seemed but a drop of poison lost in the great ocean of her love. Twenty times did she resolve to run after Athénée and make friends; twenty times was that kindly impulse thwarted by the image of those dark eyes looking into the King's with their mocking glance. She, who had done nobody an injury, spent a day of torment, while those who destroyed her happiness ate, drank, and amused themselves, without the faintest scruples of remorse.

But the punishment was not over at nightfall: far from it. The severest ordeal had yet to be undergone. Nothing but serious illness, attested by a court physician, could have

excused the Duchesse de Vaujour from her Majesty's supper-table, and further attendance on the Queen till bedtime. Large as was the circle of courtiers, the absence of a single individual was sure to be observed by Louis, and made the subject of his most cutting remarks.

Poor Louise, after her pitched battle of the morning, entered the royal saloon more dead than alive.

It was not reassuring to find Madame de Montespan, obviously in high favour, whispering with the Queen. Both were laughing heartily, and it seemed to the new-comer, as is often the case, that she must be the subject of their mirth.

Whispers, too, were freely exchanged, and all eyes seemed turned towards the Duchesse de la Vallière. For a moment she fancied something might be wanting in her toilet, and glanced anxiously in a mirror to detect the omission. What she saw there gave her courage to proceed. As was an armour of proof to a knight of the olden time, so is the consciousness of being well dressed to a woman when she goes down to battle in the press of her natural enemies, other women who want to be better dressed than herself. It feeds her strength; it rouses her spirits; it imparts daring, confidence, and endurance; it enables her to fight, to vanquish, sometimes even to forgive, the rival she has outshone.

They were beautiful, that face and figure, both in and out of the mirror; they needed no such adventitious aids as lace and jewels, paint and patches; but, above all—and this, in a French society, constitutes the highest meed of praise—their owner was *parfaitement bien mise*, “turned out to perfection!”

“He is a lucky fellow!” said one. “He has shown his good taste!” observed another. “When is it to be?” asked a third. “How does the King like it?” whispered a fourth;

while Louise, looking about her with undisguised astonishment, traversed the crowd in fear and trembling to make her curtsy before the Queen.

Her Majesty's welcome was gracious and reassuring; her first words solved the mystery.

"Permit me to offer my congratulations," said she, while an expression of relief and satisfaction shone in her dark Spanish face. "I hear on all sides that you are to be married at last to Monsieur de Lauzun."

"The Duc de Montpensier!" repeated Louise, whose heart sank, while the name reminded her of De Bragelone's first question and final appeal. "Do they talk about it to your Majesty? Has this rumour reached even to the court?"

"Do not be shy, my dear," said the Queen kindly. "We are all ready to approve, and to wish you joy."

The King, who had approached the circle, fixed his eyes on Louise, and she turned pale.

"It is a mistake," she faltered. "Believe me, your Majesty does me too much honour. The Duke has never thought of such a thing, I feel sure; and as for me——"

"As for *you*, madame," said her Majesty. "Go on."

She had stopped, with a frightened look at the King's face, but something she saw there gave her courage to proceed.

"As for me, while I am happy enough to enjoy your Majesty's favour, I feel too well satisfied with my position to exchange it for one that might withdraw me from your court."

"Well said, Madame la Duchesse!" exclaimed the King heartily; adding, in a lower voice, as he led her away from the listening circle, "I was wondering how you would get out of it. Time works miracles, my little Louise; it has made even *you* a courtier."

She flushed, and brightened with happiness. Like a flower, it needed but a gleam of sunshine to bring her out in bloom.

"Not time, sire," she murmured in the same low tone, "he is my greatest enemy; not time, but love!"

"And you do not care for him?" continued Louis in the same playful tone. "A man of energy, of ambition, a man who aims at the highest honours? Is it possible?"

"Quite possible, sire. Neither as De Lauzun nor as Montpensier; no, nor even in a loftier rank than these. Ah, sire, you never believed it!"

"Not for a moment; and between ourselves, Louise, this rumour has only gained credence since I have thought well to forbid his suit to the Great Mademoiselle. It must not be thought that he is to ally himself with royalty."

She felt a little hurt; she was too sensitive.

"But it may be thought he is to marry *me*," she exclaimed. "That is of no consequence; it compromises only Madame de la Vallière."

"And the King," he whispered, with a pressure of her hand. "Do you think I would have listened patiently to such a rumour had I not felt sure it was impossible? Do you think I could believe you capable of infidelity, Louise—I who know you so well?"

"Then you are not angry with me after all?" she asked, her spirits rising rapidly as they had gone down. "I fancied you were displeased. I racked my brain thinking what I could have done to offend you."

"There has been no opportunity. I so seldom see you."

"Whose fault is that?"

"Not mine, by the bones of St. Louis! The Queen gave a ball last night, and you never appeared."

"I was not asked."

"You have a general invitation. Your name is inscribed on the short list."

"Ah, sire, had I known you expected me, judge whether I would not have been there in the prettiest dress my wardrobe contains!"

He whispered something that brought the blood to her cheek, and Madame de Montespan, watching them from a distance, could control herself no longer.

Taking advantage of a slight movement made by the King, that no courtier of like experience would have considered encouragement enough to interrupt him, she boldly crossed the room and placed herself in front of Madame de la Vallière.

Ignoring the terms on which she had parted with that lady, braving the displeasure of Louis, who could not endure that any one, however favoured, should take a liberty, she curtsied down to the ground, and greeted her former friend with the frankest of her smiles.

"I must not be the last," said she, "to congratulate Madame la Duchesse on her good looks. We heard she was indisposed, and I called on her this morning to inquire. She looked beautiful then; she looks beautiful now. We may reassure ourselves about her health, especially," she added with a laugh, "as she wears no paint."

"Neither on cheek nor lip," said the King pointedly, for he was still displeased at the presumption of a lady who charmed him, perhaps, by her very audacity. "There is nothing false about Madame de la Vallière, neither within nor without!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE ODD TRICK.

ALONE in her luxurious apartment, Madame de Montespan sat reviewing her discomfiture, its causes, its results, and her means of repairing them, like a general after a defeat.

"I must put an end to this," she murmured, while a cup of coffee cooled at her elbow. "I have played a bold game hitherto; it shall be continued till I win on every card. This varying temperature is not to my taste. Summer heat to-day; freezing to-morrow. It makes one shiver, and it gives one cold. The night before last, at the Queen's ball, he was my slave. The great King followed me about like a dog, and I think I indulged him with a dog's treatment. How cross I was at supper! and when I relaxed ever such a little, he begged pardon for having offended *me*! At that moment he could have refused nothing. I had only to ask, I might have collected the taxes, and commanded the armies of France. The Queen looked at us more than once. I wonder if she suspects. I wonder if she spoke to him about it. No; she could never find courage. Besides, she is only jealous of Louise; this has been my chief reliance throughout. That sentiment is to be nourished and kept alive by all means whatever, foul or fair. Poor Louise! It is a pity, but she must be sacrificed! What made him so kind to her last night? Was it something of repentance and self-reproach? Was it a return to his old feelings? No; certainly not that. Love goes forward fast enough, too

fast sometimes, with the strides of a giant, but his foot-marks all point the same way. I never knew him turn a single pace back. The man has got tired of her: I see it in his eyes, his walk, the way he takes her hand. He thinks her beautiful, and she is; I will not deny it, I do not care to deny it. So are the plains of Gascony—the landscape one admires from the castle windows. How tired one gets of it! She has never contradicted him, never given him a moment of pique, or anxiety, or uneasiness; and see the result—he yawns in her face! It is not so with me. Sometimes I think I may have pulled too rudely, and, when I least expect it, the string will break. What matter if it did? Do I care for him at last? The question is not absolutely ridiculous. The King, of course, I love; so does every other woman here. Sometimes I suspect I am beginning to like the *man*. If it were so, should I, too, lose my influence? Should I, too, see myself supplanted by a rival, clinging, like poor Louise, to a slippery cord, suspended over the abyss? Bah! when it comes to that I will let myself drop. In the meantime, my patience begins to wear out. Let us finish with this comedy, once for all. If he thinks to be at my feet to-day, and at hers to-morrow, he will find himself shrewdly mistaken. Four-and-twenty hours shall decide it! What do I say? There is but one way in which it can end. If I am defeated, I will consent to retire with my husband, and live in Gascony for the rest of my days. I should deserve no better fate. I see my course so clearly. I have laid out the plan of my campaign, and it seems infallible. I wish I could spare Louise too. But what will you have? *À la guerre comme à la guerre*. She must take her chance, like anybody else.”

Then Madame de Montespan walked to a writing-table, scribbled off a little note, and rang the bell.

"They need not wait for an answer," said she with a smile that faded into sadness while she caught sight of her own face in the glass.

There was no answer required. In less than half an hour appeared her old lover at the door.

"It is good of you, Henri," said she with unusual graciousness, giving him her hand, which he pressed respectfully to his lips. "You come exactly when I want you. After all, there is nobody I can depend on like you."

"I am at your commands, madame," he replied with that calm, inscrutable manner of his, which had of late so puzzled, piqued, and interested her. "They are sometimes very difficult, sometimes a little contradictory, but I never fail to obey."

She looked him straight in the face while he might have counted ten. There was a world of tender sorrow, of melancholy interest, in her dark, pleading eyes; but he bore the trial without flinching, like a man.

"There is something I do not understand," she said with a sigh. "You are changed, yet I cannot tell how. You make me unhappy, yet I cannot complain."

"And the commands, madame?"

Such was his only comment on this touching avowal.

"Were you surprised at my note?" she asked, woman-like, in her turn.

"I am *never* surprised," he answered, "and rarely pleased. It *did* gratify me to see your handwriting once more, I confess!"

"I dare say you thought it was from somebody else. You must have so many little notes, so many correspondents, so many invitations, far more attractive than mine."

"Tell me some of them by name," he replied, "as you seem to know them so well."

"Are you a man of steel, of marble, of ice? Do you mean to say there is no one you care for at court?"

"Do *you* mean to say you ask such a question honestly, and expect me to answer it in good faith?"

"I expect you to do me a favour, a great favour, Henri—one I have some difficulty in requesting."

"Why so?"

"Because of late we have become distant, reserved, estranged. Because,—because—— Never mind why. We are both changed, Henri, to the world, to each other. Is it my fault or yours?"

"Mine, no doubt. What is it you require?"

Only a woman could have detected the slightest shade of cynicism in so humble and self-deprecating a reply. They were playing a game, these two, yet playing it, perhaps, more in earnest than one of them suspected.

"What is she driving at?" thought the gentleman. "If I lower my guard, she will have me at her mercy, and I know all I have to expect then—the humiliation, the distress, the uncertainty, to go through as before. No, no; I have learned my lesson—learned it by heart, too—and I am not going to begin the alphabet again!"

"He is harder than he used to be," reflected the lady, "but something in his voice tells me I can manage him still. I fancied I had lost him once; I minded it more than I should have thought. Is it the man I value, or the power—with him? with the other? At least let me keep what I have. The iron is hot enough now, and I shall strike."

She bade him draw his chair nearer, placed her hand on his, and kept it there while she looked confidently in his face.

"Henri," said she, "if I were to bid you go and fight a duel for me, what would you say?"

"What I always say, that I am at the disposition of madame."

"Bah! that is nothing. You like fighting duels. If I asked you to do my errands with the Grand Turk, Prester John, the Emperor of China, what then?"

"My carriage is at the door; I should take the orders of madame, and start at once."

"Henri, I am serious."

"The mood is rare, madame, but it becomes you very well."

"I am not joking, I tell you."

"No more am I."

"Your sister is a dear friend of mine. I love our charming Louise for her own sake; but that has nothing to do with it. She has been keeping a secret from me; I rely on you to find it out."

He hesitated, though but for an instant. Perhaps the one honest, healthy feeling left in that world-hardened heart was affection for the playmate of his boyhood, the blue-eyed child he used to carry on his shoulders, for whose torn frocks and soiled fingers he was always to blame, and whom he led into daily mischief with the influence two or three years of seniority conferred. But he soon reflected, "After all, it is only a woman!" judging, like mankind in general, that the sex are all alike, and that falsehood or ill-usage from one black sheep should be visited without distinction on the whole flock.

"My sister's secrets," he answered carelessly, "are not usually of great importance. What is it you want me to find out?"

"We have a masked ball to-morrow night. It will be crowded to suffocation. The King ought absolutely to draw the line somewhere. How charming it would be, for instance, if nobody were asked, Marquis, below your rank and mine! However, that is not the question. All the world will be there. Shall you go, monsieur?"

"Madame, shall *you*?"

"Of course. Fancy somebody's face next morning if one stayed away! The questions, the cross-examination, the ceremonious air, the freezing bow! What! you know it all as well as I do. Henri, I am going to play him a trick. I want your help to make a fool of the King."

"Can you not do it single-handed? If one might venture to be so disrespectful, I should say you have made a fool of him already, as you have of *me*."

"That is unkind. Listen, Henri, to my plan. Your sister and I are alike in figure; perhaps I am a little taller,—that is easily remedied. Masked and in similar costumes, even you, who know us both so well, could not tell one from the other. I mean to mystify the King, the Queen, the whole court. I want them to think they are dreaming when they see Madame de la Vallière here, Madame de la Vallière there; finally, two Mesdames de la Vallière, putting everything in confusion, like two queens of the same suit in a pack of cards. It is an idea! Would you have given me credit for so much originality? But I cannot do it unless you help me. I want you to learn exactly how your sister will be dressed. Let me know to-morrow morning. Try only to remember the costume—shepherdess, peasant, sultana, never mind which. I can trust Justine for the rest."

"You might have asked me something more difficult. Louise shall send you the whole dress from her hotel, and you can have it copied stitch for stitch."

"How like a man! Can I never make you understand us? I have taken some pains too."

"Do you think I have forgotten your lessons? There is a method of teaching that impresses its tasks on the dullest brain."

"It is done by kindness, then, not cruelty. Perhaps a little of both. Do you suppose, Henri, that any woman in

France would confide to another woman a secret of this nature? Louise is frankness itself, but such generosity would be simply unnatural. Her dress for to-morrow night has doubtless been the one subject of her thoughts, waking and sleeping, ever since she heard of the ball. To me she would rather confide the details of her last confession; but it is possible she may be less reserved with you, considering, probably, that your opinion is of no importance, and that you will forget all about it in ten minutes."

"That is very probable, madame, but at least I can remember what you want to know. It seems to me you make a great deal of so small a service."

"I like to be obeyed," she answered, with the brightest of her smiles, as he rose to take leave. "And, Henri, I am a sad trouble to you, I fear; but, believe me, there is no other person in the world of whom I would have asked so much."

CHAPTER XII.

GAME.

LOUISE had never been more beautiful in her life. A crowd gathered at the door of her hotel, waiting to see her get into the carriage. Amongst them stood a man in a religious habit, whose face was studiously concealed, and who came to-night that he might look his last on her he loved. To-morrow he must begin the atonement that his dis-tempered imagination persuaded him was to expiate her sins and his own ; but to-night he would be weak, wicked, self-indulgent, and see her just once again.

This was the vision he carried away with him to his living tomb—a vision that, in spite of penance, fast, and vigil, mental anguish and bodily maceration, was to come between him and his prayers, his self-communings, his adoration of the Blessed Saints, his contemplation of the Sacred Cross, to vex his spirit, and wring his heart, and haunt his eyes with its unforgotten beauty, till they should close in death :—A woman, in the pride and perfection of her loveliness, like the June rose, that was a bud yesterday, and will open in full bloom to-morrow ; a woman of middle size and shapely form, moving, calm and dignified, with a limp scarcely perceptible, that in no degree diminished the grace of her smooth and easy gait ; a woman of fair complexion, of sunny silken hair, delicate features, and a flexible mouth that changed its expression with every passing thought ; a woman, whose large blue eyes, so deep and wistful, shone

in the love-light of her true and tender heart ; a woman of presence, a woman of race, quiet, gentle, and self-reliant ; such a woman as visits boyhood in its dreams.

She passed him within two paces, carrying her mask in her hand. Every line of her figure, every detail of her dress, printed itself indelibly on his mind and memory. She had borrowed her costume from England, and had chosen that of a shepherdess, such as French art delighted to imitate in the fine porcelain of a later period. Her straw hat, garnished with long streamers, sat jauntily on the sleek and comely head ; her light transparent skirt was looped and gathered over a petticoat of rich quilted satin, puffed, festooned, tucked through the pocket-holes, and so disposed as to seem quaintly suggestive of the simplicity it assumed to illustrate. But for their long grey gloves, her white arms were bare to the shoulder, and her tight-fitting bodice, matching the skirt in colour, set off to admiration her rounded symmetry of bust and neck. She wore no jewels, but in their place delicate edgings of rich lace and dainty knots of ribbon, bright and blue, like her eyes.

What was she thinking of ? She never looked once in his direction. She seemed unconscious of the murmured admiration her appearance elicited from the crowd. Entering the carriage, she put her mask on, and so vanished from De Bragelone's sight for ever.

Alas for that moment which comes to many of us in life, which must come to each of us in death, when the candle goes out, and we are left in the dark !

Perhaps, after all, his predominating idea was one of intense admiration. Nothing the least like her, he said to himself, would be seen that night at the ball !

Perhaps, also, Louise held the same opinion. If so, she was destined to be undeceived.

On arriving in the ball-room—not too early, for she was

sufficiently a woman to know how the effect of a striking toilet is best enhanced by a timely arrival and judicious departure—she found the scene of mirth, splendour, and mystification at its height. The royal family alone remained unmasked. Every one else had taken advantage of the opportunity to court, puzzle, and mislead everybody else. Here a bare-footed hermit made fierce love to a vestal virgin; there the knave of clubs sat shaking with laughter at a broad joke hazarded by Joan of Arc. A contractor in the character of a mendicant whispered his offer of a heavy bribe to a minister disguised as a Stoic; and a jester of the twelfth century laid his breaking heart at the feet of Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi. Yet amongst all that motley crowd Louise detected, as yet, no toilet so complete as her own; and the approval of this highly polished society, if expressed less loudly and in rather choicer language, did not fail to ratify the verdict of a Parisian mob.

It was pleasant to be well-looking and well dressed; it was gratifying to be envied and admired; yet male smiles and female whispers soon began to pall on Madame de la Vallière, and she found herself, as usual, longing but for his opinion whom alone she cared to please.

The crowd gathered, as crowds always do, in the most impassable places. Louise, desirous only of reaching the royal circle, found herself jammed in a doorway, from which egress was simply a question of patience and time.

At her elbow stood a pilgrim, with sandals and scallop-shell complete, masked, of course, like herself, yet in whose air and figure there was something intensely irritating, because familiar, although so well disguised. The same with his voice: she had heard it scores of times, she was sure, yet could not remember when or where.

“Beautiful shepherdess,” said the pilgrim, “it is my

mission to preach the truth. I have seen nothing to compare with you in all my wanderings."

Though her heart was heavy in a vague foreboding of evil, she could not but enter into the spirit of the hour.

"Gentle pilgrim," she returned, "from what country, then, do you come?"

"From the island of Paphos, where women are tender and men are true, where love is still worshipped faithfully as of old."

"Gentle pilgrim, you should never have left it: things are very different in France. What made you come here?"

"The sheep are all untended in that country, black and white. I have travelled many a long league to look for a shepherdess."

"Then your toils are over; you have found one."

"*Parbleu*, I have found two!"

"How two?"

"Madame, you have a twin sister. Madame, you have a double. Madame, those beautiful eyes, that I see shining through your mask, are not more alike. The other shepherdess is in the next room, talking, even now, with the King."

She started, and felt grateful to her mask, that it covered the agitation of which she was painfully conscious. Talking with the King, not ten paces off, and she could neither see nor approach him for the crowd! Her voice trembled, which made it more difficult to be recognised, while she whispered, "Who is it? Tell me the truth, fair pilgrim; I dare say you know."

"Certainly I know; so does the Queen. That is why her Majesty looks so displeased. It is Madame de la Vallière, of course. The King would never pay such marked attention to any one else."

Her heart sank: she turned cold and faint. What did

it all mean? Had the blow really fallen at last? Was any amount of happiness, past or prospective, real or imaginary, worth that moment of sickening torture and suspense?

"Are you sure?" she faltered. "Do you know Madame de la Vallière yourself?"

"Do I know the fingers of my own hand?" was the reply. "Who does *not* know the beautiful young Duchess, the King's favourite—the loveliest woman at court? There is no mistaking the turn of that head and neck; and, if she wore a dozen masks, they could not disguise the graceful, though uneven, walk that is one of her peculiar attractions. Ah, madame! when you ask me if I know her, you touch a chord that vibrates to my very heart."

It was pleasant, no doubt, to hear herself so well described. She could not but recognise the likeness he drew so favourably. Again she felt a provoking curiosity in regard to this pilgrim, on whom she had made such an impression; but the gratification of flattered vanity was too soon quenched in her disheartening reflection, "What is the use of all my beauty, all my truth, all my attractions, if they cannot keep for me the only man I ever loved?"

With her misery came the recklessness that so often accompanies a wounded spirit driven to extremity.

"Have you never told her your good opinion?" she asked with a forced laugh. "Perhaps, if the lady knew her conquest, she might value it more highly than you think. Is it the custom in your island, fair pilgrim, for the women to speak first?"

He turned to answer, when his arm was seized by the Great Mademoiselle, who drew him away with considerable energy, bestowing such a scowl on his companion as placed a masked face at considerable disadvantage. Then, while the pair lost themselves in the crowd, voice, manner, figure,

all became familiar in a moment, and Louise identified the pilgrim of Paphos with that Monsieur de Lauzun who had been given to her, by rumour, in marriage, and for whose love the King's first cousin, the Great Mademoiselle herself, was only too eager to abdicate her exalted rank, and descend from its pedestal into private life.

The entertainment gathered spirit as the night wore on. Question and answer, jest and repartee, home truths and polite falsehoods, flew from lip to lip, and still one of the twin shepherdesses remained lost in thought on the seat into which she had subsided when the pilgrim of Paphos left her; while the other, defying alike her Majesty's frown and the remarks of society, royal displeasure and courtly etiquette, continued to monopolize the attentions of the King.

Louise, seated in the embrasure of a window, was completely hidden by the folds of its heavy curtain. Except for Monsieur de Lauzun, and those who witnessed her entrance, there had appeared as yet only one shepherdess at the ball. His Majesty's continued devotion to this lady left no doubt that it must be Madame de la Vallière who, with her usual taste, had adopted so attractive and fanciful a disguise. The Queen, outraged and indignant, vowed vengeance on such unblushing effrontery. Nobody but the King and Madame de Montespan were aware of the cruel trick practised on an injured woman, whom, with unexampled perfidy, lover and friend thus made the scapegoat of their intrigue.

Lost in a labyrinth of memories, misgivings, and speculations, Louise remained unseen in her hiding-place, while couple after couple passed her close enough to brush against the folds of her dress. Had she not been so preoccupied, she might have learned many a startling secret, overheard many a compromising avowal, from those who considered

license of speech and sentiment an established privilege of the black mask that so well concealed a blush. She might have made herself acquainted with their likes and dislikes, hopes, fears, and treacheries. Had she sat there till morning, she would have learned something fresh to shock, amuse, or interest her with every passing minute. But she found no attention to spare. Her whole mind was engrossed with one idea. Who was this second shepherdess thus occupying her place? Had Louis been deceived by the likeness? Was it possible that, in ignorance and good faith, he lavished on another endearments really intended for herself? Folly! She was undergoing torture for nothing. She would at once seek out the King, and everybody should be undeceived.

But, even while she rose to put in practice this discreet resolution, his well-known voice within arm's length caused her to shrink back in her hiding-place with a beating heart, like the hare in its form. Accompanied by the other shepherdess, Louis had halted, in his progress round the rooms, so close that, although still unseen, she could have touched him with her fan. Faint odours from his bright and perfumed locks stole on her senses as of old; but the ribbons that trimmed his sleeve were no longer of her favourite colour, and she felt the chill certainty of coming evil, that seems to paralyze the body, while it sharpens the mental faculties by its keen stimulant of pain.

With blanched cheeks, shining eyes, every nerve racked and quivering, scarcely venturing to breathe, absorbed wholly in the one effort of listening, Louise waited for her doom. It seemed already pronounced in the tone with which the King addressed his companion.

"What more would you have?" he whispered. "Is not your triumph complete without dragging its victims

through the streets at your chariot wheels? Athénée, you are as pitiless as—as you are beautiful!”

Louise remembered so well that inflection of the voice. It meant he was in earnest. How long it seemed since he had spoken thus to *her*!

“Do you like me in this dress?” returned Madame de Montespan. “Look your fill, sire, while you can. I shall run home and change it before we sit down to supper. It was a good idea, was it not? Poor Louise must bear the blame for once; and, judging by somebody’s black looks, I do not envy her the little quarter of an hour she will pass in the Queen’s apartments to-morrow. When we all unmask at supper, you must look as if we met for the first time to-night. Will you come and speak to me before them all?”

“Will I not?” he returned in a voice of passionate and unrestrained devotion.

Louise had heard enough, but more of the torture was yet to come.

“I only found out this morning the dress she meant to wear,” resumed Athénée, “and I lost no time in having it copied. Am I really so like her? Don’t flatter: tell me what you think.”

Another stab.

“Like her!” he repeated. “You are as much superior as the diamond to the pearl!”

“That is prettily said, do you know! Love sharpens one’s wits, I am certain. To-night affords a proof. I have had you all to myself for three-quarters of an hour. I was sure Louise would be late. By the time she appears I shall return in another dress, and nobody but you and I need be one bit the wiser.”

“She *is* late—later than usual. I own I am curious to see how she looks in this charming costume. It ought to suit her blue eyes and fair hair.”

Athénée's pride was in arms at once. "Do you mean you care to see?" she exclaimed angrily,—“that, after all you have protested, you still take an interest in her? What does it matter to you how she looks, and what she puts on?”

“A man may have curiosity without interest,” he replied, trying to pacify this fiery spirit. “Poor Louise! it would be cruel and imprudent to break with her altogether.”

Both women who heard him fancied there was something of compunction in the words.

Athénée's temper got the better of her. “Enough, sire!” she said angrily. “I cannot presume to control *your* actions, but, at least, I am mistress of my own.”

“What do you mean?” he asked in some alarm, for the great King's attachment to this lady was in no small degree based on the fear of losing her regard.

“I mean this,” answered Athénée with considerable energy. “I have acted a part long enough. If I am to love you, I will not share with another. The time has come for your Majesty to decide. Choose between her and me!”

“As if the choice were not already made!”

“Honestly, from your heart?”

“From my heart! Respect and esteem I may accord to others; but all my love, Athénée, is for you.”

She leaned her head towards him till her mask touched his curls, and they passed on.

Amongst those to whom dress was the most important subject on earth, except precedence,—and they constituted the majority of society,—there was much discussion, next day, as to whether two shepherdesses had attended the masked ball, or only one. None had appeared at the royal supper-

table; and this seemed more extraordinary, as it was a shepherdess who, earlier in the evening, so monopolized the conversation of the King. It was generally agreed, however, that Madame de la Vallière had behaved with less than her usual discretion, and that, in this case, the long-suffering Queen would be justified in visiting such effrontery with open displeasure and rebuke.

"There is a limit," said the most censorious of the ladies, each reflecting how far she could herself go with impunity—"there is a limit, and the Duchesse de Vaujour has overstepped established boundaries. She has broken, not the Commandments, but the convenances, and should be punished in proportion to her offence."

Black must have been the crime that remained unexpiated by such pain as Louise was destined to undergo when she left the ball for her splendid, lonely, and miserable home. If there be anything in descent—if it be true that the older races of nobility can endure more unflinchingly than sufferers of humbler birth, then did she gallantly assert her kindred with the blood of La Vallière in that passage through a crowd of whispering observers to her carriage. Many a hero has walked to his death with less courage than it required to bear up the dainty head under the mockery of its flaunting hat, to move calmly and equably as behoved the wearer of so gay a robe, that none must know was folded round a breaking heart. She bowed courteously to a peer of France, who made way for her. She thanked one of the King's yeomen who attended her to the carriage steps with a torch. The very lackeys who offered their arms could not have guessed why their mistress returned home somewhat earlier than usual. But once within her coach, protected from all eyes by its solitude and seclusion, she flung herself on her knees, buried her face in the cushions,

and abandoned herself, without control, to an overwhelming paroxysm of grief. In that confined and gloomy space, but one definite idea seemed to present itself. "I have gone through an agony surely worse than death. Oh that I were at rest, now and for ever, in the tomb!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE WINGS OF A DOVE.

SHE longed for them, no doubt. She might as well have longed for the wings of an angel. Years of error were not thus to be expiated by moments of agony; and resolutions made to devote her life to Heaven, in the seclusion of a cloister, had to be carried out in self-sacrifice and self-abasement before the world.

The character of Louise de la Vallière was in all respects essentially womanly; in none more so than a habit of relying on the judgment of those she esteemed. It was not her nature to stand alone; and this very weakness, though it proved the cause of her downfall, perhaps first won the attachment of her king. She could not assume the black veil, she could not cut herself off from all the duties and interests of life, without consulting friends and relatives—women of station and men of pleasure, the shrewd old courtier no less than the pious and ascetic priest. She took counsel, then, of her mother, of her kindred, of Monsieur This and Madame That; lastly, inventing plausible excuses the while, of Louis himself.

Did she look for his support along the rugged path she meant to tread? Did she entertain some vague hope that he would forbid the journey, since it must separate them for ever? Who knows? Gold is rarely so pure as to be without alloy; and in the noblest efforts of humanity can be found an element of weakness and of sin.

It was easy to persuade herself that loyalty, respect, common gratitude, required her to inform his Majesty formally of her project, and that she was bound to request an interview, so as to bid him personally an eternal farewell. The writing a few lines to that effect cost her but little effort, and she waited for his answer with something of the old anxiety and impatience that used to make her heart beat and her cheek turn pale.

It arrived, and she brooded over it unopened for a time, as if to renew the luxury of feelings once so delightful, still unforgotten, that were never to return. It was a mockery, no doubt, bitter enough, yet not without its drop of sweetness, in the thought that, come what might, nothing could ever deprive her of the past.

When she read the note, how cold it seemed! how short and condescending!—more like the communication of a sovereign to his vassal than the outpouring of a lover's heart for the woman who had given him her happiness, her reputation, and her life. "He would wait on her," he said, "at the usual hour. She might assure herself he would endeavour to meet her wishes in everything that was reasonable and right."

Who shall blame her if she spent a longer time over her toilet, took greater pains to look her best, than in the happy days when he used to protest that his Louise was more beautiful in a plain white muslin with a simple rose than any other lady at court in the lace and diamonds of full dress? If the sacrifice must be made, why should she depreciate it? Let him thoroughly realise the value of his loss!

When he entered her apartment, how noble he looked, how kingly, how beautiful, how like what he used to be! Nothing seemed changed but his greeting; for, though it was gracious and dignified as of old, the delicate perceptions of a woman's love did not fail to detect constraint of

manner, a forced smile, and a heart gone from her for ever.

They chatted like mere acquaintances, retailed some court gossip, ridiculed the marriage of a maid of honour, deplored the death of an aged marshal, and discussed the new fashion of dressing hair. The King paid her an elaborate compliment, which she acknowledged with a curtsy and a smile.

Yet the woman's heart was breaking, and the man scarce concealed his impatience at the prolongation of their interview.

She could not find courage to approach the dreaded subject. It was his Majesty who made the plunge with something less than his usual self-command.

"So you have decided to leave us, madame?" said he, pacing up and down the room, and crumpling the ribbons on his sleeve, as was his habit when discomposed. "Why this new freak, this sudden determination? What does it all mean? Temper, indisposition, or only feminine caprice?"

"Caprice!" She looked at him in wonder while she repeated the expression.

"There is no other word that conveys my meaning," continued Louis in a tone of irritation. "Why are you to attract the attention of all the world by your silence, your reserve, your dejected looks, finally, your withdrawal from court? You place yourself, me, everybody concerned, in a false position. The quarrel is absurd, undignified, unjustifiable. Why will you not make friends with—with Madame de Montespan?"

"Can you ask it, sire? You! It is incredible!"

A certain catching of the breath, she tried in vain to keep down, prevented her adding another syllable.

"I *do* ask it," he returned; "more, I insist on it! Are you in your senses, madame? Can you not see the reason?"

He had never known those blue eyes flash fire till to-day.

Could this proud and angry woman be indeed his gentle Louise, on whose forbearance he had traded so long, whose patience he had at last worn out?

"I can!" she repeated, confronting him with head erect, flushed cheeks, and panting breast. "For months, for years, I have tried to deceive myself; but blind I will not continue another day! So long as I remain at court, Madame de Montespan usurps my place, robs me of my rights, enjoys your Majesty's favour, and retains, not only her appointment, but her credit with the Queen. Directly I am gone, see! the bubble bursts, the plot explodes, your wife frowns, your courtiers whisper, and you, sire, find yourself forestalled and compromised at every turn; then will Madame la Marquise have to bear with all that I have endured so patiently—perhaps, at last, to earn the same reward. What matter? In the meantime, she is a new plaything, bright in the gloss of paint and varnish, fresh from the shop; while I am faded and broken, only fit to be thrown away. Shall she lose her character because I have a soul to be saved? Certainly not; that is the royal decree. Truly, sire, I make you my compliments. Your conduct is worthy of a gallant man and a great king!"

He stared with astonishment. His own heart could not but admit the truth of her reproaches, and, with courage above the average, he yet shrank from facing the anger of the other sex.

"Louise," he pleaded, "this is unlike you; the more so that you are unkind to me. I have never yet found you rancorous, obstinate, unforgiving. I came here to-day, partly at your own desire, partly on the part of Madame de Montespan, with her petition to be reconciled. When I tell you that it is I who bear the olive-branch, Louise, will you not accept it for my sake?"

She softened at once: the storm had burst, to be followed by

gentle, steady rain. She was crying quietly, and he felt that for him, at least, she could cherish no feeling of ill-will. Too well he knew that, though he had slain her with his hand, she would have loved him still.

"Ah, sire!" she murmured, "I am as a woman at the point of death. It is my earnest wish to be reconciled with my enemies, and to forgive as I hope to be forgiven. I loved you, sire; alas! I love you still; and I gave you my youth, my beauty, my good name, my self-respect. Do not grudge me a few short years for the salvation of my soul!"

"You love me, and yet you leave me!"

"I leave you to Madame de Montespan. Won by her attractions, you have long ceased to care for me. It is cruel, it is perfidious; but what am I to do? I can only break my heart and die!"

"Louise, I am tired of these reproaches. I do not choose to be always contradicted and taken to task. After all, am I not King of France? Besides, I have conferred rank, lavished riches on you and yours, given you estates, the tabouret, this very hotel, everything you chose to ask."

"And taken from me your heart—the only thing I care to have."

"The question is not of hearts, but of common sense. What is it you complain of? After all, life is a matter of reality, not romance."

He was getting angry again, vexed and irritated, as feeling himself in the wrong. In such passages of arms the woman who has lost her empire necessarily comes by the worst. She is fighting at a disadvantage, naked and unarmed, against an adversary cased in steel. Her own buffets fall weak and harmless, while every thrust of his pierces to the quick. It is the most hopeless of all contests; there is no resource even in flight, no consideration, no fair play, and no mercy to the fallen.

"You used to think differently," she sobbed. "You did not speak like that when you wooed and won me, a young innocent girl, in the household of Madame."

Nothing irritates a man so much as to be reminded, by its object, of a past attachment. "Madame!" he repeated brutally. "Since you have brought up the name of Madame, let me tell you it would be well if you showed the same consideration for others that Madame was obliged to show for you."

She had got her death-blow at last. And this, then, was the end of all; this was her recompense for years passed in anxiety, suspense, self-reproach, moments of wild and guilty happiness alternating with days and weeks of depression and despair—to be reminded that she was not even his first love; that as he had deposed a former mistress in her favour, so she must herself make way for a successor; and that, instead of being all in all, she must be content to take her turn with the others, refraining even from reproaches or complaint.

"Enough, sire!" she replied with the quiet dignity he had once found so irresistible, "I have nothing more to say. There are places of refuge, even for such misery as mine. Oh that I had the wings of a dove, then would I flee away and be at rest!"

"I have expressed my wishes, madame," replied the King stiffly; "it is not my habit to repeat them. If your decision is irrevocable, I will not condescend to plead with you; but for my sake choose a retreat in which the rules are not too stringent, the penance too severe, and—and we have spent some happy hours together: do not quite forget me, Louise, even in the cloister."

She caught up his hand and pressed it to her lips, her eyes, her heart. "Forget!" she repeated, "never, never! Ah, sire! I will remember you in vigil, fast, and penance, but, above all, in my prayers."

"Be it so," he answered gravely. "Farewell! farewell!"

It was done; he had passed out of her life. Stunned and stupefied, she remained in a fixed attitude, staring rigidly at the door, long after it closed on him, like a woman in a trance. She failed to realise the position. Was she awake, or might not all this be the mere illusion of a dream? She could not rally her intellects sufficiently to weigh the question, and at first was only so far conscious of her misery as to feel a vague pity for the sufferer, who seemed to have no immediate concern with herself.

At such moments humanity is apt to doubt its own existence, and that of its surroundings. Because all has become dark, we wonder whether the light we remember was not a mere trick of fancy; we wonder if we really remember it, or if we only think we do. When it comes to this, we are but a hair's breadth on the safe side of insanity.

Yet a mere trifle is enough to restore its balance to the brain. A familiar sound, a homely duty, the tread of a footstep, the striking of a clock, awakes every nerve and fibre to a sense of pain. We start into life at the sting, and are conscious, for the first time, of the agony we are required to endure.

When her servants came to look for their mistress, they found her prostrate and motionless, her face against the floor, her arms and body forming such another cross as that on the wall under which she lay.

Years afterwards she was discovered in the same attitude, stretched on the cold stones of her convent, when she had been dead some hours.

BOOK THE THIRD.

LOUISE DE LA MISÉRICORDE.

CHAPTER I.

PENANCE.

A MAN can live very few years in the world without being struck by the inequality of that measure in which fortune, fate, chance—say, rather, Providence—deals out good and evil to the wayfarers on their inevitable journey. Purple and rags, dainty dishes and bare bones, health and sickness, pleasure and pain, seem to be allotted at hap-hazard, quite irrespective of reason, merit, and the fitness of things.

It is well for us that we have been taught to believe in such a future as shall reconcile these contradictions of the present, and to look on our various paths, smooth and rugged, strewed with flowers or bristling with thorns, but as so many roads that lead by different turns to heaven.

One is taken, and the other left. We grieve, we murmur, we question the justice of an omnipotent decree that we cannot understand. In some cases, even before our own time comes, we are forced to acknowledge the wisdom, nay, the mercy, of that very affliction we sustained in morose impatience or undutiful complaint. There is no philosophy like the philosophy of religion; there is no peace of mind like his who does his duty honestly, so far as his short sight extends, and leaves results to One who cannot be

mistaken, because He reads the future no less clearly than the past.

It is not to be supposed that the disappearance of Madame de la Vallière was accepted without comment in so conversational a society as the court of France. Nine days by no means exhausted the wonder, and rumours of her destiny became more and more incredible as time wore on. She had founded a convent at Vaujour, she had endowed it with all her revenues—a fabulous sum—and drawn up for its government a code so severe, that the Archbishop of Paris himself protested against its adoption. She had asked his Majesty's leave to travel, and was gone to visit Hungary, Turkey, the far East, with a view of bringing the Mahometans into the true faith. These reports were totally unfounded. She had changed her confessor—that was the real truth—and, by his directions, had started on a pilgrimage barefoot to Jerusalem. She had been dispatched on a secret mission to the Prince of Orange; one of Condé's staff-officers had passed her through the lines. She had married the ex-King of Poland, and Louis the Magnificent was to reinstate him on his throne! How badly people were informed! Such reports had only been spread to avert suspicion. A great personage was offended who never forgave! It was all very well to talk of foreign missions and French endowments; but her credentials had been a *lettre de cachet*, and convent was too mild a name for the Bastille. That was your only real *oubliette*. What! The guard turned³ out, the governor made you his bow, and, *crac!* the whole affair was done with, once for all!

Nobody ventured to question the King. Her Majesty looked little happier than before; and as for Madame de Montespan, not only was she haughtier and more satirical than of old, but her sarcasms, stronger and bitterer than ever, were no

longer dashed with the redeeming qualities of good-humour and irrepressible fun.

To pass through the presence-chamber while she stood conversing with his Majesty was called "being put to the sword" by the irritated courtiers.

Those acute observers noticed, also, that her gaiety was often artificial, her mirth forced, and her sallies did not always provoke a burst of laughter from the King.

When, without scruple or remorse, people have marched straight to their object, trampling their neighbours' gardens into ruin, destroying fences, removing landmarks, and violating rights, they may find only disgust and disappointment in the position it has cost so much to attain. What is the use of climbing high to scan but a wider stretch of the dreary, barren waste?

A man, too, be he king or subject, is far less easily managed by his later loves than by his first. It is a strange sad truth that the more knowledge he gains of women, the less lavish does he become of that uncalculating generosity which flings itself slavishly down at the feet of its idol. A boy can live on a soft look for a week, on a kind word for a month; but hunger of the heart is not so easily satisfied when the beard is grown. Experienced travellers have seen the mirage too often to be deceived; the very knowledge of its nature robs it of half the charm; an effort is required to keep up the illusion; and, without illusion, what becomes of romance?

Louise de la Vallière had touched the King's heart, yet even thus she was unable to withstand the damaging effects of custom, security, and time. Madame de Montespan roused his fancy, satisfied his intellect, captivated his senses; but half her empire was gone in the very moment she assured herself of its existence, and she was clever enough to know that, like a dancer on the tight rope, her footing

had never been so secure as while continual change of posture balanced her, now on this side, now on that.

As a declared lover, Louis became less subservient and more exacting, carrying matters with a high hand himself, yet impatient of the slightest notice she accorded to others, and giving way to a jealousy that seemed the offspring of pride rather than love. The Marquise grew to look anxious, worn, unhappy; day by day she felt less confidence in her beauty, therefore in her power, and, while she feared that her charms of person and mind were decreasing, made the fatal mistake of allowing herself to love the King in her heart.

Thus her punishment began. To her husband she was, from the first, an obstacle and encumbrance; to her children, a mother only in name; to Louis, she used to aver bitterly, she had become a mere slave; and, for the true heart that had been her own from the first, nothing but a cruel and unsparing fate. This, perhaps, was the reflection that galled her most. A man seldom pities the woman he has ceased to care for; she drops out of his life, and he had rather not be reminded of her existence. But it is different with the other sex: they may hate, but can never be quite indifferent to those whom they once thought masters of their destiny. An attachment is broken off, or dies a natural death; everybody behaves as badly as possible, or there is a great parade of generosity and fine feelings on all sides. No matter; she cannot bring herself to make a clean sweep of memories and associations at a moment's notice; and, if she *must* return a lock of hair, invariably keeps a few threads to remind her of what was, and what might have been.

Perhaps, but for the dazzling future that opened on her ambition in the admiration of the King, Madame de Montespan would have rewarded the unswerving fidelity of

Henri de la Vallière by choosing him for a husband at last. That they were totally unsuited affected the probability of such an event not at all: fitness, indeed, for each other appears the last consideration of those couples, rather than pairs, who enter the holy state of matrimony. But Athénée de Mortemar did certainly, at one time, fancy she liked her young admirer well enough to pass her life with him; the idea was not wholly dismissed after she became Madame de Montespan, and crossed her mind oftener than she wished even when she found herself the greatest lady at court, and the most influential person in France.

Louis, keenly alive to all matters affecting his self-esteem, was not slow in observing that the lady on whom he had set his fickle affections showed more consideration to the brother of his own early love than seemed warranted by her friendship for a woman whose position she had destroyed without scruple, to attain her own advancement. It was not his nature to barter reproaches: he neither pitted himself against Henri nor expostulated with Athénée; but he simply appointed the Marquis de la Vallière to an honourable command on a distant frontier, and required him to leave for his post at an hour's notice; then he passed into the Queen's great saloon, engaged half-a-dozen ladies, of whom Athénée was one, in a game of cards, from which nobody could possibly rise till his Majesty set the example, and told her what he had done.

How little people understand each other, even those who are nearest and dearest! Would he have admired her qualities as an actress, or would he have felt repugnance for her duplicity, could he have known the effort it cost her to accept this information with a serene brow and an unpanting bosom, white and smooth like marble, as hard too, inside and out?

"Your Majesty's appointments are always judicious,"

said she, without so much as the quiver of an eyelash. "The Marquis de la Vallière is a fine young officer, who only requires opportunity to distinguish himself."

He watched her narrowly. He seemed dissatisfied. Instinct, rather than observation, led him to suspect less indifference than she wished to display—hinted that under the icy surface ran an angry current, deep and dark and cold. He never took his eyes off her face, and noticed that she shrank from meeting his look with her accustomed frankness.

"It is a command," said he, "that could only be given to a gallant man. Had I known a better soldier of his years, I would have appointed him. He thanked me with enthusiasm; for in my army, madame, the post of honour is the post of danger."

Even now she did not wince; but a hard, keen glitter came in the dark eyes, and her lips closed tighter on the small white teeth.

"For your Majesty's soldiers," she answered carelessly, "danger counts nothing: honour is all in all. The Marquis is a Frenchman; therefore, without question, he is brave."

At a game of brag Madame de Montespan was the last person to betray the strength or weakness of her hand.

"In faith, I am not so sure of that," returned the King, who had witnessed a pardonable disinclination to be killed in his own, as in troops of other nations. "I can only answer for this: I never saw a man receive his orders to march with more alacrity. 'Can you be ready to start in an hour?' said I. 'In a minute, sire,' was his reply. 'Have you no farewells to make?' 'Only to your Majesty.' He is three leagues off while we are speaking, and by this day week will, perhaps, have gained a victory."

"That is nothing unusual, sire," she answered; "particularly when you command the army yourself. Let us talk of something else."

But there came into her heart a strange sad misgiving, half regret, half remorse, that Henri was gone from her at last, and she might ,perhaps, look on that brave, kind face no more.

Nevertheless, she sat on and played out the game coolly, methodically, making the most of her cards, surrounded by enemies, suspected by the Queen, and watching, as a pilot watches the storm, every mood and temper of Louis himself. This, then, was the summit of her ambition ; this was the prize for which she had schemed, and pondered, and striven, trampling under foot all her better feelings, her truth, her memories, her self-respect. For this she ruined the early friend of her youth, whose kind and gentle heart forgave every treachery, every outrage, and whose sympathy she never asked in vain. For this she banished from her presence the man who loved her best, lured to exile, and probably to death, by the glittering bait of military distinction. For this, too—and here the angry reflection stung her to the quick—she exchanged the hidden influence that was irresistible for an ostensible authority, carrying with it less real power than she had wielded heretofore.

Was it worthy of her, she who had so much more of Vashti than of Esther in her composition, to stand thus in subjection before any monarch on earth ? And did not her servitude seem the less endurable that he won upon her day by day as a man, and that she felt her own sovereignty failing in proportion as her love for him increased ?

Jealousy, too, gnawed her with its envenomed fangs. She counted its tortures for little while she inflicted them on Louise de la Vallière, but winced under them now whenever the King whispered in the ear of other beauties, sat by them at cards, or exchanged brighter glances than usual with the court ladies across the supper-table.

He spared her but little, she thought, and should have

been more considerate for one who made such sacrifices on his behalf. Could it be that his affection was cooling? that variety was as necessary to his heart as amusement to his intellect, and that she, who once outshone all competitors, must give way to a rival in her turn?

Then, straining every nerve to be agreeable, she, perhaps, defeated her own object in the effort, striving in vain to recall the old, careless gaiety, that hazarded whatever came uppermost, indifferent whether it flattered or affronted him, yet never failing to please the King.

Of her Majesty's black looks she made small account. The Queen, though they vexed her sore, endured with touching patience the infidelities of her capricious husband, and looked for consolation in the strict performance of her duties, the austerities of her religion. Even her gentle nature, however, was sometimes tried too far, and Madame de Montespan found herself more than once the object of such covert sarcasms and open reproofs as had cost poor Louise many a sad heart, many a flood of tears. None the less were they felt by Athénée because received with stinging retort and dry eyes. Though she bore herself so proudly, carrying all before her with a high hand, none could have felt more keenly than did Madame de Montespan the false nature of a position that envy prompted her to covet, and honour forbade her to retain.

She was working out her penance already. The tree of evil soon bears fruit; those who elect to sow the wind and reap the whirlwind have not long to wait for harvest. A woman may suffer as much, though she does not repent so sincerely, in satin and lace as in sackcloth and ashes. Many a splendid sinner accepts a course of chastisement and mortification under the yoke of her sin that, borne in a right spirit, would go far to atone for her evil ways. Baal is well pleased to inflict torture on his worshippers, bidding them

draw blood with their knives, and leap and howl, and make themselves ridiculous, to mock them for their pains. Madame de Montespan at court, on the pinnacle of her glory, was less to be envied, even from a worldly point of view, than Louise de la Vallière wearing out her knees on the cold stones of her convent in unceasing prayer.

CHAPTER II.

PRAYER.

THIS was her remedy—anxious, fervent, unremitting prayer; sometimes in seasons of utter hopelessness and depression, sometimes in a state of exaltation and enthusiasm not far removed from fanaticism, but always earnest, always sincere, always with the humble repentance of a Magdalen. It seemed to her that no atonement could expiate the errors of her past life, and that, even while she spent days and nights on her knees, she must still be the most unpardonable, as she was the most penitent, of sinful women.

Yet no sooner did she enter the Convent of the Carmelites, that strictest and severest of Orders, than she felt as if she got rid of some unnatural and hideous burden that had bowed her to the earth for years. She did not know how sore it galled till her wounds began to bleed afresh as she cast off the weight; and never realised the turmoil and confusion of a sinful world till she reached this home of penance, prayer, and peace, only to be exchanged at last for a resting-place yet more quiet, calm, and holy in the tomb.

What a contrast! A red brick wall ten feet high, an oaken door four inches thick, seemed all the partition between good and evil, lost and saved, heaven and hell! On one side a proud and delicate lady, shining in jewels and fine raiment, counting nothing but earthly love and worldly honour to be compared with earthly pleasures and worldly goods; on the other, a kneeling, broken-hearted suppliant, clothed in

her self-denying garb of serge and linen, plain to austerity, disfiguring to the utmost woman's alluring beauty, concealing her form, and forbidding the crowning glory of her hair—a penitent who had done with the things of earth no less than as if already laid in one of those graves of which she caught glimpses through the quiet gallery, yet who was even now rejoicing to know that she had her foot on the ladder at last, and would climb it, step by step, to heaven.

Madame la Duchesse de Vaujour got out of a coach and six, gaudy in the pomp of heraldic bearings, surrounded by domestics, with eyes full of tears, like their mistress, to knock at the portal of the Carmelites in the Rue St. Jacques; but it was Louise de la Vallière who passed the threshold never to return, and Sister Louise de la Miséricorde, whose wealth of shining locks, falling soon after to the unsparing scissors, caused the very nuns assisting at the sacrifice to cross themselves in mingled admiration and regret. She had chosen her part advisedly and without precipitation; had returned into the world that she might undergo the highest of all trials, in witnessing, during a hard probation, those scenes she desired to quit for ever; and when at last she was considered worthy to assume the black veil, neither Superior nor Sisters doubted for a moment but that this new companion, beautiful as the angels, was already inscribed by them on the book of life in heaven.

And now Sister Louise de la Miséricorde—for, as expressing that *she* more than others must rely on infinite mercy alone, such was the designation she adopted—really began to live. It seemed to her that never yet had she fathomed the purpose of existence.

Formerly, a deep and engrossing love, of the earth earthly, fastened her soul down with its iron chains. Now the chains were broken, the liberated spirit spread its wings,

and there was nothing but a covering of clay, itself almost etherealised by fasting and mortification, to impede her flight to heaven.

So she was persuaded, prostrate before the altar, under a representation of that Holy Sacrifice which could well ransom deeper guilt than hers.

But those are grievously mistaken who believe that from such a sanctuary sin and sorrow must necessarily be shut out, or that the devil cannot forge a key to unlock the doors even of a religious house. So long as the blood runs and the brain thinks, something of evil finds a lurking-place in the human heart. Under the roof of a church, no less than in the resorts of man, it is necessary both to watch and pray. Sister Louise might drive him out of her thoughts at Matins, Prime, Vespers, Complines, and other services ; but there was many a weary hour to pass between these forms and ceremonies of her exacting faith, during which the image of that royal lover, haunting her memory and filling her heart, came to thrust itself between the new-made nun and heaven.

Half dreaded, half desired, the vision seemed always to appear in the same form : she need only shut her eyes, and there it was, real and vivid as life. Louis, young and beautiful, sitting on his white horse in the forest of Fontainebleau. Again the hounds bayed, the horns rang, the green leaves flickered across the blue sky ; the breeze lifted his hair, and fluttered the plumes of his hat, held low against the shining stirrup-iron ; again the sunlight flashed from the gold on his baldric, from the bit and bosses of his bridle ; again the dear voice whispered kind and soft, the blue eyes looked lovingly in her own. Sleeping and waking, in vigil, fast, and penance, this was her trial, her punishment, her delight !

Often she thought the devil was thus permitted to assail her, because he had but a short time, and she would soon be free from his wiles in an accession of sanctity, or in the security

of death. Often she wondered if her brain could be failing—if she must lose her hope of heaven in the curse of madness before she had expiated her sins. On either supposition she was fain to undergo more trying fasts, severer mortifications, and, by such injudicious remedies, only increased the virulence of her disease. Still she never faltered, nor permitted herself to look back. The same constancy, the same unselfish, loving spirit, that kept her so loyal to an ignoble faith, came to her assistance now in the strife of good and evil; the same gentle, trusting nature that once led her into sin, weak, weary, wounded as she was, now helped her steadfastly along the rugged path of repentance and salvation.

With a humility as touching as it seemed inexplicable to the wondering Sisters, this true penitent entreated permission to perform such laborious and degrading offices as were allotted to the lowest members of their community. Was a floor to be scrubbed, a pail emptied, a sick-bed tended, who so ready to undertake the duty as Sister Louise? The harder and coarser these functions, the more eager did she seem to accept them; and every day saw this heart-broken woman, lately a duchess of France and a king's favourite, on her knees washing the stone floors of the convent, or bending like a willow over the wooden pails she carried to and from the infirmary.

Nay, she would even fix her eyes on the ground if she met any of the Sisters as she passed to her labours or her orisons, declaring, with heartfelt self-abasement, that she, the sinner in high places, was not worthy to look these good women in the face. When one of them answered, that for such matters there was little to choose in the sight of Heaven between the greatest and the least, that the Apostles themselves could ask no better than to be in paradise with those who crept through the bars of its gate, Louise flung her arms round the old nun's neck, and burst out crying like a child.

At first the hours dragged wearily enough. As the novelty of the situation wore off, that enthusiasm which accompanies all religious conversions began to pall. Then came fits of overwhelming lassitude and despondency, when the soul itself seemed to grow torpid—when the brain refused to reason, and the heart to pray. Doubts assailed her on all sides. Was it well to have been so easily vanquished in the worldly warfare, so timid, so yielding, so tender of conscience, and so weak of will? Would it not have been better to fight the wicked with their own weapons, resisting Madame de Montespan with intrigues as wily as her own, retaining her empire in the King's heart by sheer courage and resolution, as her ancestors held their lands? She might still have occupied the highest position at court; might still have shone an object of flattery, admiration, even of envy, to the noblest names in France; and might still have sunned herself, day by day, in the smiles of one she used to love so dearly, and whom she must not so much as think of now!

What had she in exchange? The dull round of daily duties, the languid prayers, the frequent vigils, the scant and tasteless meals, the death in life of an irksome indolence, an oppressive vacuity—seclusion without leisure, restraint without repose. Better be a rat in the wall, a mole in the earth, a corpse in the tomb!

Then, as if conscious that she was tempted of the devil, she would fling herself down on her knees to pray, and lo! a golden beam broke in on the darkness, and presently her soul was flooded in light. A strain of music from the choir, a hum of quiet voices responding in measured cadence to the benediction of their Superior, perhaps only laughter of children outside the walls, or the song of a bird in the convent gardens, was enough to waken such religious transports as made rich amends for many an hour of despondency and gloom. Fixing her eyes on the crucifix with its Sacred

Image, she would remain motionless, like one in a trance, while soul seemed to detach itself from body, and float upward to the realms of bliss, gazing with love and rapture on the golden gates, the jewelled walls, of the holy city, lustrous and dazzling like the sun, on the trees that cannot wither, the flowers that never fade, the crystal sea that neither ebbs nor flows, and the troops of shining spirits, more beautiful than morning, circling upward, ever upward, till their ranks were absorbed in the luminous mist of glory that blazed from the great white throne.

Sinking again to earth, and things of earth, how steadfastly she determined that no effort of hers should be wanting to attain that paradise of which even here below she was vouchsafed a transient glimpse,—that, having put her hand to the plough, nothing should persuade her to look back! No; not if she were tempted by all the kings and kingdoms, the rank, and power, and riches, of such a world as ours!

At times like these, no amount of suffering, bodily or mental, could wring from her a sigh of complaint. Were the stones hard and cold, the poor limbs weary and sore with kneeling, what account should be made of such trifling inconveniences on a journey of which the end was heaven? Did the services of a hospital seem tedious, and on occasion disgusting, had not the good Samaritan tended with his own hands the wounds of that hapless wayfarer who fell among thieves? Were fast and vigil so frequent and so severe that her emaciated body fainted under the trial, did not its very failure give promise of the speedier release? And, for those whose sins were forgiven, death was but the opening of a door that shut behind them in paradise!

Louise would often declare, with a radiant smile on her pale, wan face, that when she suffered she was happy; when she did *not* suffer, she was only tranquil and content.

No human life, however, even in a convent, is so uneventful or so secluded as to be quite cut off from the outer world. Rumours, that find their way through oaken doors and brick walls, are apt to become more marvellous in proportion to the resistance they have overcome in their transit. No great length of time elapsed before it was noised abroad that in the Convent of the Carmelites lived a nun of pre-eminent sanctity, and that her name had once been Louise de la Vallière. The fashionable world were delighted: it seemed to reflect credit on their order, that one of themselves should thus have achieved distinction in so different a walk of life; and that the best-mannered, the best-looking, above all, the best-dressed woman at court should take the precedence to which she had been accustomed, even among saints preparing for heaven. They boasted of it at their balls, their card parties, in the great saloon, the presence-chambers, finally, at the King's supper-table.

Louis was gifted with wonderful self-command. While he loved her still heartily and sincerely, in the old days when he would have asked no better than to make the blue-eyed beauty of Madame's household Queen of France, he could hear her name uttered without wincing. Now he received the accounts poured in on him of her extraordinary piety with no more emotion than if she had been some cardinal for whom he could do nothing, and whose promotion depended wholly on the longevity of a pope. Yet he pondered over the intelligence nevertheless, and those of his courtiers who studied his character to the best purpose were least surprised when he expressed a desire to visit this celebrated convent in person, and observe the austerity of its regulations with his own eyes. There must have been something of interest, much of curiosity, in this intention; but surely not one lingering spark of love.

Louis, therefore, accompanied by the Queen, and attended by a few of his household, presented himself at the door of the Carmelites, and asked permission to visit one of their inmates, a Sister already celebrated for her piety under the name of Louise de la Miséricorde.

It must have astonished the great monarch not a little, and afforded him perhaps food for wholesome reflection, to be denied point-blank, and informed respectfully, but firmly, that rules observed in such religious houses were not to be set aside even for the King of France! Louise herself came to the grating, and addressed the Queen through its bars.

“Your Majesty,” said she, “knows the rules of our community, and is not ignorant that the presence of a man becomes profanation. No exception is to be made in any case. The Queens of France have always accorded this privilege to the Carmelites, and I must entreat her Majesty not to forget our rights to-day, or, if she has done so, to forgive me for reminding her of them.”

Then the pure, calm face, pale and attenuated, with its large blue eyes, retired from the grating, and was seen no more.

She had fought the last of her battles. The strongest temptation of all had been nobly faced and overcome. Henceforth the way would be smooth, the task easy, home in sight, and the end close at hand.

CHAPTER III.

PARDON.

SHE had conquered love: it was an easy matter to conquer hate, if indeed so unworthy a sentiment could find room in that kind and gentle nature. Louise de la Miséricorde in her self-denial and self-sacrifice, with her continual prayers and protracted meditations, her diet of black bread and spring water, her four hours' sleep, her garments of sack-cloth, and other bodily mortifications—above all, her heartfelt humility and repentance—was becoming daily more akin to those blessed angels with whom she hoped to dwell in heaven through all eternity.

The Carmelites themselves, the Sisters who were familiar with her inmost life, to whom every action, almost every thought, was transparent, became so impressed with her piety and asceticism as to declare this converted sinner worthy of canonisation for a saint. Perhaps these good women were brought to think more charitably of that world they had abjured, while they reflected on the noble fruit borne by a tree thus transplanted into their own garden from the wilderness outside. Certainly they crossed themselves with less of alarm and repugnance than formerly, when again a coach stopped at their gate, bearing the fleur-de-lys on its panels, and a lady in deep mourning alighted, to request an interview with Louise in the convent parlour.

The Sister who admitted her felt that conscience would exact a heavy penance for the unworthy admiration excited

in her simple mind by so splendid an apparition. To her eyes the visitor seemed as a being from another world; so proud, so stately, so beautiful—yes (*culpa mea ! culpa mea !*), beautiful as Lucifer himself, son of the morning !

It was not without a shudder that this new arrival looked round on the retreat chosen by her early friend—such a retreat as she had sometimes thought might be her own last refuge, but of which she felt all the sadness and dreariness now. “Who enter here leave *life* behind,” she said to herself, while traversing the narrow strip of gravel that divided the house from its encircling wall, to catch a glimpse through open doors of its long sombre galleries, painfully clean and whitewashed, its secluded chapel, dim and gloomy like the entrance to a sepulchre, and at the far end of the vista, crossed here and there by dark-clad forms, treading softly with clasped hands and white caps, flapping as they bent their heads in prayer, a black cypress pointing to heaven from amongst a row of tombs.

Was this, then, the only path to salvation ? Was this the narrow way along which alone a soul must travel to reach its wished-for home ? The penance, the vigils, the fasts, prayers, and mortifications, all these she might, perhaps, accomplish ; but was it really indispensable to wear such an unbecoming dress ?

Madame de Montespan shuddered, and felt thankful she was not going farther than the convent parlour after all.

She had scarcely time to observe its bare walls, relieved only by a crucifix and a picture of the Virgin exceedingly ill painted, ere the door opened, and a Sister stood before her, whom, for the first moment, she failed to recognise, though in the next she was folded in her arms, while unaccustomed tears began to flow, and she murmured, “Louise, my friend, my darling ; it is indeed thyself ! Forgive me, forgive me !

I have come but to ask thy pardon, and implore thee to restore me to thy love ! ”

What a contrast as they stood there on the threshold of a sanctuary in which the one had found a happy refuge, from which the other shrank with repugnance and disgust ! They seemed to illustrate and personify the allurements of good and evil, the beauty of holiness and the pride of life. Athénée, though in deep mourning, was attired with all the splendour that became her queenly charms so well. There lurked the unforgotten sparkle in her dark eye ; the mirthful scorn played sweetly, as of old, round her chiselled lips ; and if care, sorrow, disappointment, wear and tear of the world's anxieties and the world's vexations, had taken something from the fresh colouring and limber ease of youth, her face seemed none the less attractive that it was sad and thoughtful ; her figure looked but the more shapely that it towered erect and haughty, as if protesting against its wrongs.

And Louise, the beautiful Louise, of whose charms she used to be so jealous, whom she admired in her secret heart above all women on earth, had she changed for the better or the worse ? It was a difficult question to answer. The Carmelite costume afforded little scope for feminine adornment, and a Sister of the Order might be supposed to rid herself at once of vanity, as the first human weakness she was called on to renounce. Yet, in spite of a dark serge, a crisp white linen cap drawn round her face like a shroud, low down on her forehead and covering her chin, with the fatal black veil bound tightly over all, there was a something in the expression of this fair young Sister that rendered her far more beautiful than she had ever been as a maid of honour. The blue eyes, always so soft and wistful, seemed to have caught a deeper lustre from the heaven to which they turned in faith and hope, while on every feature sat the calm of that

perfect content which can only be afforded by a heart at peace with God and with itself.

The two women looked at each other as they had often looked before, taking in at a glance their respective accessories of dress and bearing; but there was nothing now of rivalry in their notice,—only astonishment, and perhaps envy, on one side, pure admiration and kindly pity on the other.

“Pardon!” repeated Louise, while the visitor kissed her hand and bathed it in her tears. “Who am I, the lowest of sinners, to be asked for pardon by another? If you ever thwarted me, Athénée, the offence has been long since forgotten. I have prayed for you here in the silence of night with the same love I used to feel when we were girls at Château de Blois.”

“You have not heard, then?” murmured Madame de Montespan, while a spasm of pain swept across her beautiful face.

“We hear nothing in the convent,” answered Louise, “but the bell that calls us to prayers.”

“Prayers!” returned the other. “Ah! yes, it is of prayers that I come to speak—prayers for conversion of the living, prayers for salvation of the dead!”

“To what else are we consecrated?” asked Louise with her old happy smile. “We Carmelites acknowledge but one duty in life—to fast; one pleasure—to pray!”

“Even for me!—for *me*, who have been the blackest of sinners, who now, this moment, seeing you standing there like a saint in a missal, am yet so wicked that I cannot implore you to pluck me out of the depths, and drag me up with you to heaven!”

Louise pointed to the cross above their heads. “With mine arm round that,” said she, “I have strength to pull a hundred such from lower depths than those to which you ever sank. The sea is roaring, Athénée, your limbs are

weary, and your heart failing for fear. Take hold of my hand, dear, that I may bring you safe to shore, lest the ebbing back-water suck you down once more into those boiling gulfs!"

"I cannot! I cannot!" sobbed the other. "I am too wicked, too hardened, too depraved! If I dared enter such an Order as yours, I believe the Sisters would fade and wither in my presence as in a blast from hell. I believe the Prince of Darkness would come to claim his servant among you all, and carry me away with him from the very altar. No; I have chosen the worse part, and must abide by it. There is a limit to everything!"

"Except mercy, except redemption. Athénée, Athénée, will you not believe me when I pledge myself for you here by the blessed sign?"

She dipped her fingers in the holy water while she spoke, and crossed herself on face and bosom. The other, who was a good Catholic, did not hesitate to follow her example.

"But I am a murderess!" said she.

"A murderess!" Louise opened her eyes.

"No better. I could not have been more pitiless, I could not have taken his life more certainly, had I slain him with my hand. Do you see this black robe, Louise, this crape, these ornaments of jet? I shall wear mourning till I die!"

The training of a nun had not so completely stifled the instincts of a woman, but that Louise glanced an appreciative eye over the exquisite fabric of her friend's penitential garb, ere she rejoined, in some anxiety—

"Mourning!—till you die! Speak then, Athénée, and for whom?"

"For your brother! Oh, Louise, I have sinned deeply, but surely, surely, I have been beaten with many stripes!"

The Sister crossed herself once more, and bowed her head. What had she dreaded? Whose name did she expect to

hear? Why did an icy chill shoot through her purified nature, and wring her chastened heart? Was that a sob of relief, or anguish, or resignation? After a minute or two she looked up; but though the blue eyes filled with tears, there was a patient smile on the calm and gentle face.

"Let us pray for his soul," she said humbly, "and for yours and mine. I, too, am dead to the world and the world's affections; but I can feel pity for those who are still writhing in the net, and would help them if I can. What do you mean, madame; and why do you so reproach yourself?"

"Because he loved me!" burst out the other; "because I was his idol, his evil star, his fate! And I would have loved him too—yes, I know it now!—had not somebody come between us and tempted me, and suspected him, and sent him away to die. Listen, Louise! To win that man's love—first because he was a king, I acknowledge it; afterwards because—because—do not ask me why—I moved heaven and earth. Bah! I have lost the first, and I loathe the last. What matter? I attained my object. Yes, they may say what they like, he would have kissed the ground I trod on with his own royal lips; and fifty Madame Scarrons, with breviaries in both hands, cannot rob me of my triumph. You know it—*you*, my injured, outraged friend! Oh, Louise, I wish I had died when we were girls at Château de Blois! I wish Monsieur de Montespan had taken me to Gascony when I implored him! He was blind, rude, obdurate—in short, a fool. He is answerable for my perdition. I wish—I wish—— What is the use of wishes? See the results! Mine were granted, and I should be happier as a rag-picker in the streets. I am tortured and humiliated at every turn. The man who loved me dies in exile, and the friend of my youth is buried alive here in a convent! Will you tell me there is a Providence above us, and that all these things are for the best?"

"Hush, dear, hush! Do not set yourself to measure the compass of Heaven. How many of us would seek a refuge here, but for the storms that drive us in to shelter? Look at me. Do you think I was not weak and weary? Do you think my feet did not bleed, and my heart ache? But for *you*, Athénée, perhaps I might still be wandering in the dark outside; and I bless you, therefore, day and night in my prayers!"

The other wept in silence, and Louise, desirous of pursuing her advantage, pleaded on.

"Will you not take example by what you see? Will you not believe that I am far happier here—yes, in this plain coarse habit and these flat-heeled shoes, which *are* very trying to the patience—than I was in my costume of a little English shepherdess that you imitated exactly? I often laugh, Athénée, when I think of it: your maid had so short a time to make the dress, and she did it so well."

Madame de Montespan smiled through her tears; but they flowed faster than ever, and she could not yet find voice to answer.

"There are so many distractions in the world," continued Sister Louise de la Miséricorde; "so many obstacles to trip us up, so many phantoms—utterly unreal, but none the less formidable—to frighten us from heaven; no wonder we stumble, and waver, and turn aside out of the way. Here, on the contrary, all seems plain and easy; the road is smooth, the wicket open: you need only walk straight on and go in."

"They would not take me! they would not take me!" sobbed Athénée. "The very saints would turn their backs, and I should be driven with ignominy from the gate!"

"Listen, Athénée; be reasonable. Will you answer if I ask you a plain question?"

"Go on."

"How came you into our convent? Were there no sentries to challenge, no porters to refuse admittance?"

"It was quite simple, my dear. I stood on the steps, knocked at the door; it opened from inside, and that was all."

"We are a strict Order, Athénée, and that is our rule. Do you think, then, there is less pity for a sinner in the kingdom of heaven than among the Carmelites? Shall Sister Anne Marie be more easily satisfied than St. Peter? And if the Church receives you here, shall you be refused admittance into paradise hereafter? Come to us, then, Athénée, that we may pity and cherish you. See! our arms are open in loving welcome, and we will help each other to carry you gently and tenderly, like a lost sheep, into the fold."

"I will think of it—I will hope for it. Perhaps, after I have been spurned and slighted, bruised and trampled on, again and again, I may bring my mind to ask admission: I may not think shame to offer Heaven a life that is repudiated and valueless on earth."

There seemed more bitterness than true contrition in the flash of her proud eyes, the sneer of her scornful lip; but Louise, engaged in mental prayer, heeded rather the words than the manner, and answered gently—

"So be it! Even at the eleventh hour you will not come too late."

"Enough!" exclaimed Madame de Montespan impatiently. "I am not here to argue points of faith and doctrine; I came to confess my faults to you, Louise, and to ask your forgiveness. I was much to blame; I was a wretch, a viper. What! a monster of perfidy and ingratitude! He loved you, dear, and I never rested till I won him for myself. See the retribution that has overtaken me! I care for him—I care for him; and, behold, another woman is edging and creeping,

day by day, into my place! Older, uglier, lower in rank, what is the charm that fascinates him? Oh that you were at court again, my darling, to bring him to your feet once more! She would die of envy and spite—die within a week—and I should dance in triumph over her grave!”

Louise looked pained and shocked.

“Oh, Athénée!” she murmured, “you did not come to tell me this?”

“No, no! Your patient face rebukes me, your gentle eyes cover me with shame. I would give all I have on earth—I would even give all I once *thought* I had—to be like you. I feel less wicked since I have seen you, and less miserable. I must go back into the world again, but not without your pardon. Louise, I sacrificed your happiness to my vanity; I slew your brother with my selfishness; and I ask you to forgive me on my knees!”

She would have sunk to the floor, but that the other raised her with a tender embrace.

“It is so easy to forgive those we love,” she whispered. “Athénée, I will pray harder than ever that we may meet again in heaven!”

Madame de Montespan, breaking from her friend’s embrace, looked at her for the space of a minute in mute astonishment.

“What is it?” asked Louise with her pleasant smile.

“I am watching to see your wings grow!” was the answer. “Louise, you are simply an angel. I expect at every moment you will mount straight up into the sky!”

“You little know!” said the nun, while her bright smile faded. “It is so hard to shake off things of earth. It takes so many years of penance, fast, and vigil to train a soul for heaven. I can but hope, and wait.”

“You will not have to wait long.”

“Amen!” And so they parted, never to meet again.

CHAPTER IV.

PEACE.

It was a longer wait than either of them thought for. Many changes came and went, many stirring events took place in the world outside, while Louise de la Miséricorde trod her daily round in the convent of the Rue St. Jacques, humble, contrite, and hopeful, yearning only for the release that seemed so loth to come. Great men died, the boundaries of empires were removed. France lost Turenne, and England gained William of Orange. The Palatinate was devastated a second time; and Steinkirk handkerchiefs came into fashion, because the King's musketeers fought like lions with their cravats untied. The Edict of Nantes was revoked, and Louis lost half a million of the most productive and valuable of his subjects with the scratch of a pen. The Rhine, as usual, witnessed the assemblage and exploits of French armies, but even the calling out of *ban* and *arrière-ban* failed to wring troops enough from an exhausted population. Louvois, minister at once of war and finance, imposed outrageous taxes, but came to the end of his resources, and the country seemed to bleed at every pore. Maria-Theresa, too, was dead. That pious, gentle nature, as the King said himself, never caused him a moment's pain but in its loss; and Louis, already completely under her influence, contracted a secret marriage with Madame de Maintenon. Yes, the Widow Scarron, the humble companion of careless, haughty Madame de Montespan, was now, to all

intents and purposes, Queen of France ! His Majesty required, indeed, sympathy and comfort under his reverses. John, Duke of Marlborough, had taught him that his soldiers were not invincible. Fagon, his doctor, hinted that the strongest constitution would not last for ever ; and Le Tellier, his Jesuit confessor, warned him that for the greatest kings on earth must come that day of reckoning which absolute power itself could not put off. Madame de Maintenon consoled him for the discipline of all three. In her apartments he transacted public business ; by her advice he regulated his diet, his amusements, his hours of exercise and sleep ; with her, also, he took serious counsel for the welfare of his soul.

How strange a history is that of the human heart ! Here was a woman ruling with unbounded influence over the most despotic of monarchs, the most fickle and sought after of men, who once entertained for her so unconquerable an aversion that he could not remain five minutes in her company without betraying his dislike ! He found fault with her dress ; he objected to her person ; he hated her manners. She was a prude, a bookworm, a *précieuse*. No ; he was tolerant enough, and good-natured, he hoped, but he could *not* stand the Widow Scarron !

She was clever and resolute, gifted with that spirit of perseverance, that fixity of purpose, which, whether its object be the training of a poodle or the subjugation of a hero, is sure to succeed at last ; so she waited and watched. His Majesty's children were ill, and she took charge of them. Such a responsibility involved frequent reports ; her letters amused, interested, piqued him ; the thin end of the wedge was inserted ; he consented to see her ; she talked even better than she wrote, and it is needless to describe the result.

Of all his loves, this was the most prosaic and the most enduring. Crossed by occasional infidelities, it yet flowed

smoothly on, through mature manhood to extreme old age. If the torch of his affection burned feebly, at least it shed a steady and permanent light, fed by a force of habit that proved far stronger than mere sentiment, and fanned by a sense of religious duty that the lady, a zealous Catholic, took care to keep alive. His love for Louise de la Vallière had been the romance, his attachment to Madame de Maintenon was the reality, of the King's life.

In the meantime, that Sister of the Carmelites who had once bloomed so sweetly, fairest and freshest of flowers, at the French court, laboured soberly on towards her home in heaven. Often weary, always penitent, sometimes desponding, she never for one moment desisted nor looked back. Impressed with a conviction that she exceeded all other sinners in guilt, she was fain to outdo all other penitents in remorse. Not satisfied with the rigorous discipline practised by her Order, she sought hourly occasion to increase its severities and mortifications of her own free-will. Every morning found her awake two hours before the rest of the community, praying at the altar till her knees were sore. Every night, while the other nuns lay fast asleep in their cells, endless orisons and enforced vigils attenuated her body and exhausted her strength.

She exposed herself to cold with a persistency that excited the surprise of the Sisters, who often found her in a fainting fit stretched on the pavement of the oratory or the floor of their laundry, where she washed and hung the linen out to dry.

But no word of complaint passed her lips. Watching, fasting, praying, fading away into eternity, who so patient as Sister Louise de la Miséricorde? It was only in solitude that her courage sometimes failed, and she might be discovered on her knees in a dark corner, with tears running down her cheeks.

When questioned by the Sisters, she would answer, "I do but weep for my past sins, which all the tears I shed can never wash away!"

It was to be expected that her constitution should break down under such continual austerities. Bodily pain became at last the result of bodily prostration. Nature, persistently outraged, protested against ill-usage with headaches so violent that the sufferer could not open her eyes; yet even thus Louise seemed unwilling to admit the severity of her punishment. "It rests me," she said. "I am so weary of earth and earthly things, that to be rid of them is a positive relief!"

On another occasion when the Superior, commiserating her afflictions, proposed some simple remedy, she replied with infinite humility and gentleness, "Am I not happy to endure pain here, while I have you to console me, that I may enjoy happiness where I shall not need your sympathy hereafter?"

"You are a saint already," said the mother, crossing herself. "I think you will not stay with us long!"

It was the very sentiment expressed by Madame de Montespan when she bade her friend farewell; so on one point, at least, these two women, so different in everything else, were of the same mind.

True religion, the sense of an inner being apart from the body, and of a responsibility wholly unconnected with the world and the world's interests, acts variously on the various characters of mankind. In some—and these have, perhaps, arrived at the subtlest comprehension of its nature—it produces cheerfulness, confidence, and sustained energy in the affairs of daily life. They consider themselves travellers on a journey, bound to move steadily on in the direct road home, yet entitled to take such wholesome rest and recreation by the way as shall not impede their progress nor divert them from their goal. They may pluck the flowers

gladly, and gather the fruit with a thankful heart ; but they will not tarry for the one, nor turn aside into the wilderness after the other. More, perhaps, from temperament than training, they are strong and of good courage in life and death, making the best of both worlds, in so far as to be content with this, while looking forward in faith and hope for the next.

But there are many natures, sensitive, enthusiastic, strong in imagination, weak of will, to whom a little liberty is a dangerous concession, who are capable of effort, self-sacrifice, even endurance, so that these be in extreme while they last, yet not of such long continuance as to become wearisome from repetition. Like little children, though they can totter along at a run, they must not try to walk alone, especially under the lightest burden, or they fall down. For these the way to heaven is indeed a narrow path : its hedges cannot be too high, lest they look over into the laughing landscape on each side ; nor too close together, so that their course may be as short as possible, deviating by a hair's breadth neither to right nor left.

For such, peace, safety, and salvation are best secured within the walls of a monastery or a convent. They do not make their one talent into ten, neither can they justly be said to bury it in a napkin ; for surely an example of piety, self-restraint, humility, and Christian charity is not without effect on the noisy world outside. They are holy, they are earnest ; they walk, no doubt, according to their lights ; but it is well that these conscientious recluses are usually of too delicate a fibre to fill useful parts in the great social scheme, and that the noblest thinkers are also the busiest workers for the benefit of mankind. There may be selfishness even in religion ; and neither for his own soul nor body will a good man take such exclusive thought as to render him indifferent to the welfare of his fellow-creatures both in this world and the next.

Louise de la Miséricorde had nothing left to give but her prayers. Of these she was indeed unsparing, at rest and work, in chapel and out, by day and night. If she put up a petition on her own behalf, it was only to entreat that she might soon be called home. How long and trying had been her pilgrimage was known but to herself and Heaven. The body was exhausted, the soul very weary; and so the end drew near.

Proud as might be the Carmelites of austerities thus practised by one of their Order, the Lady Superior, chosen as such for her good sense and administrative powers, did her best to discourage Sister Louise from the rigorous fasts and lengthened vigils that wasted her to a shadow day by day. In vain the docile, gentle nun, contumacious on this one point alone, persisted in her self-imposed penances, till it became obvious that nature could bear no more. She would entreat permission to fast for weeks together on bread and water; and, when the Superior of the convent, a dignified lady of the house of Bellefond, refused to sanction such suicidal maceration, she would expostulate with tears. "Ah, my mother!" she would plead, "you think it is kindness to spare me; but the harder my penance, the sooner it will be done, and the quicker shall I get to heaven!" Then she would drag herself into the chapel, and remain on her knees, telling her beads, for hours.

As the ravens brought food to the prophet in his hermitage, who knows but that in those dark nooks and corners angels hovered about and comforted her unseen, sustaining their weary sister with loving counsel, rendering her fitter in every holy whisper for their own bright company in heaven?

It would be endless to recapitulate the works of penitence by which she was fain to make her peace with God; impossible to estimate the value of her humble gifts to that altar on which a broken and contrite heart is the richest offering

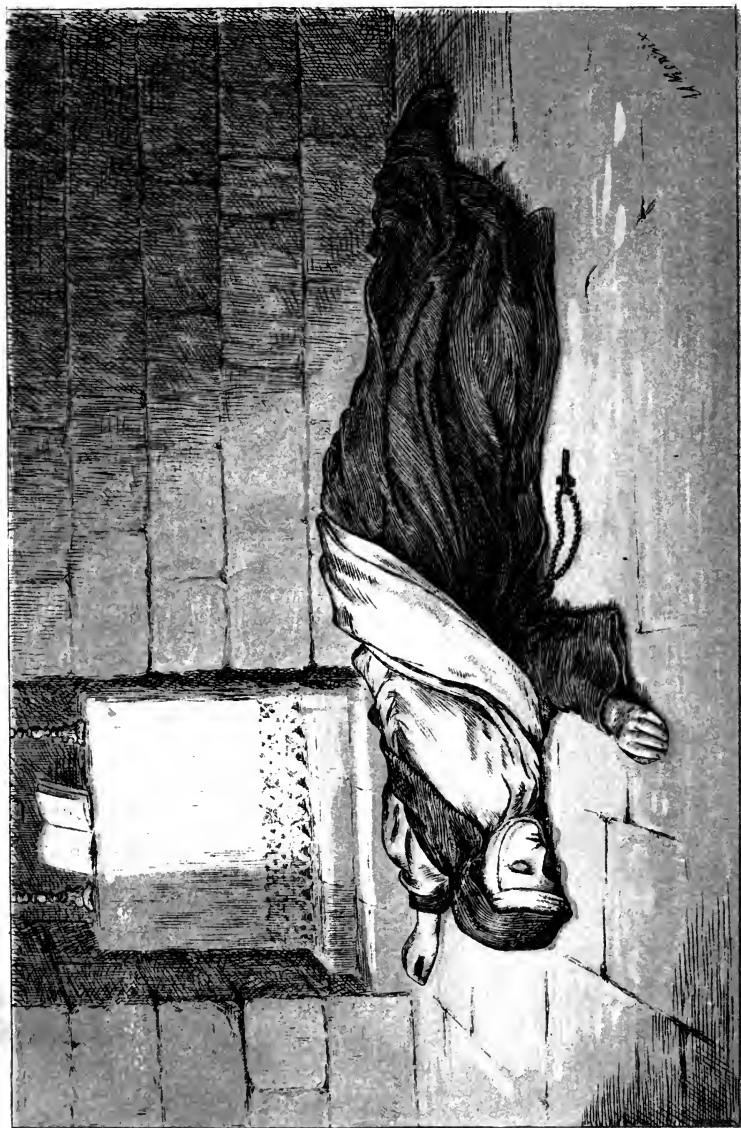
that can be laid. If she sinned much, she suffered more; if she loved too deeply with an earthly love, she repented humbly with a heavenly repentance; and he must be a stern moralist, rather than a good Christian, who can believe that she was not forgiven.

So, one morning, when the Sisters assembled in chapel, there was a gap in their ranks, and Louise de la Miséricorde was absent from her accustomed place. It formed no part of their discipline to admit earthly considerations of any kind into their thoughts at such a time, yet more than one glanced in her neighbour's face with a shiver of doubt and dread. When the service was done, they sought their missing Sister in her cell, and found, not Louise, but the earthly covering from which her spirit had broken to go home.

She was already stiff and cold, extended, face downwards, on the stone pavement, with her arms stretched out in the form of that cross before which she had spent her last breath in prayer.

It was a light task to lift her fragile, wasted form, and lay it decently on the hard, coarse couch, where it would sleep no more. It was a labour of love to perform for it the last offices with careful, reverent hands; and those Sisters who tended the corpse of one they had so loved and honoured were persuaded, in their simplicity, that even in death it smiled.

When the King heard of her decease, he neither wept nor sighed, but only said, "Poor Louise! she died for *me* at the moment she entered her convent!" But the nuns who chanted her requiem, and laid her in the grave, crossed themselves meekly, and told each other in whispers, "Blessed is our Sister, who was dead and is alive again, for at last she has found peace!"





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